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ALABAMA JOE; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.

A TALE OF THE BIG BLACK SWAMP.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "GOSPEL GEORGE," "THE LONG HAIRED PARDS," "OLD BULL'S EYE," "FACETIOUS PETE,"
"JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," ETC., ETC.



"KETCH HOLD O' THAT, STRANGER, BUT DON'T PULL TOO POWERFUL, HARD UNTIL I GIVE THE WORD; JEST ENOUGH
TO STIDDY AN' KEEP YOU FROM SINKIN'—SO!"

Alabama Joe; OR, THE YAZOO MAN-HUNTERS.

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CHAPTER I. PERILS OF THE SWAMPS.

"FROM bad to worse, and getting no better very fast! Is there no end to this infernal bog?"

In a tone of impatience, not unmixed with a certain uneasiness, these words fell from the lips of a "solitary horseman" one close, sultry afternoon in midsummer. As he spoke, he drew rein and fanned his heated face with his hat, which he removed from his head for that purpose.

The prospect was far from being a cheerful one.

Upon every hand extended the dismal, sweltering swamp with which he had been blindly struggling since mid-forenoon.

Here and there were scattering canes, but the soil—if soil it could be called—appeared too wet and cold even for them. Full half of the stunted, unhealthy looking trees which stood scattering around, were slowly dying of too much water, though their straggling boughs were so thickly interlaced with vines and other parasitic plants as to almost exclude the light of the glowing sun. Yet the heat was so oppressive that there was an unwholesome, fog-like miasma arising from the decaying vegetable matter, strongly suggestive of fever, if of no worse sequel to that swamp ride.

With a sorely puzzled air the strayed traveler arose in his stirrups and stared blankly around him upon every side. But the protracted scrutiny was followed by no brightening of the gloomy frown upon his anxious face, for he knew that, beyond the possibility of a doubt, he was lost in the great swamp that lay between the Chitta-Loosa, or Big Black river and the Yazoo.

"An agreeable prospect for the night—and no lack of bedfellows!" the young man muttered with a slight shudder as he turned away from the contemplation of a couple of brown spotted water-moccasins to listen to the distant bellowing of a bull-alligator.

"There is only one course," he added, with an air of sudden resolution, as he gathered up the bridle reins. "By pushing straight ahead and long enough, we'll come out somewhere. Up, old fellow! better a tough struggle with safety at the end, than a resting-place here, with alligators and snakes and frogs to sing us to sleep."

Though sorely jaded from its long struggle through the tenacious mud of the swamp, the horse pricked up his ears at this address, which was uttered aloud, as if addressed to a sentient being, and once more entered upon the hopeless struggle against fate.

Having thoroughly tested his own skill and found it wanting, the traveler now left his horse to its own guidance, with a faint hope that its natural instinct would discover a way out of the loathsome labyrinth. He would have been wiser to have done this earlier in the day, when he first began to suspect that he had gone astray, and even at this late hour, the result might have been different had not human reason over-riden animal instinct.

The noble creature floundered along as best it could, now hough deep in tough, clinging mud or "gumbo," where the lifting of each hoof was followed by a report almost like that of an exploding pistol, now sinking over the knees in a glue-like slime, while the foul-smelling, stagnant water rose to its heaving flanks.

Instead of improving, the prospect appeared to grow still darker, and from a feeling of annoyance, the lost traveler began to grow fearful that his case was even worse than he had as yet realized.

Only a few days before he had smiled incredulously at the dark and weird legends of the swamp; of the unfortunates who had been swallowed up by the black and treacherous depths, there to die of fear and starvation, to perish miserably of poison from the fangs of the water-moccasin or the cotton mouth—to fall victims to the man-eating alligator, or still more terrible monsters with which popular superstition peopled the deeper recesses of the swamp; but now these legends came back to his mind with a strongly depressing vividness, nor could he banish them, strive as he might.

The natural consequence followed. He began to lose the cool courage that had thus far supported him, and his usually clear judgment became clouded.

He first showed this by urging his horse forward at a pace that was suicidal under the existing circumstances. At best the struggle was heart-breaking, but his growing impatience made it worse.

Twice the panting beast stumbled over submerged roots, severely shaking both itself and rider. Each time something very like an oath broke from the young man's lips, as he jerked forcibly upon the stiff curb and sunk the rowels of his spurs into the dripping, quivering flanks, until, under this unmerited punishment, the horse lost confidence both in itself and its rider, floundering on in two-fold fear.

Still its instinct induced it to keep along where the undergrowth was thickest, pursuing a winding course from tree to tree and bush to bush, though the wide-spreading network of roots and submerged limbs which had fallen from the dying trees rendered the footing anything but secure, even while a far more inviting course lay upon either hand.

As long-continued fatigue weakened its limbs and relaxed its muscles, stumbles and awkward slipping grew more frequent, until the rider impatiently took the guidance of affairs into his own hands once more, thus precipitating the catastrophe.

This occurred when an opening in the swamp of several acres lay directly in the line which they had been following.

This space was entirely free from trees or undergrowth, save for a few straggling flags and reeds. The surface was covered with a short and apparently dense carpet of grass, while here and there could be seen a small hummock, the top of which was dry and seemingly hard-baked by the heat of the sun.

No native of a swamp country would have been deceived by this plausible outside, nor would the horse, which turned to follow the line of brush, though it was scarcely better accustomed to swamp traveling than was its rider, Zenas Dawson, but it was not suffered to pick its own course any longer, when almost the first step after the deviation resulted in a painful stumble and a desperate scramble to avoid a headlong fall.

Zenas Dawson drew rein and gazed keenly out upon the delusive opening. The edges appeared quite dry, and seemed to offer sound footing for a horse. At least, so the traveler decided, and a brisk application of the keen spurs sent the unwilling animal out into the opening.

For a few rods the springy turf afforded a most delightful change from the heavy floundering of the past few hours, and Dawson was beginning to congratulate himself upon the welcome termination of a truly disagreeable adventure, when the inevitable catastrophe occurred.

Both fore feet of the horse broke through the thin crust which covered the treacherous mire beneath, and with an instinctive dread of the jaw-breaking bitt, the beast plunged ahead in a desperate attempt to recover its footing. But this only rendered the situation of both horse and rider the more desperate.

The animal sunk to its belly in a thick, viscid mire that fettered its limbs, holding them beyond the possibility of extraction, unaided.

So unexpected was this occurrence that the rider was partially unseated at the first plunging struggle, and was quite so when the headlong progress of the animal was so abruptly checked.

Flung from the saddle, he fell upon his left shoulder, breaking through the thin crust, and being well-nigh smothered before he could free the upper portion of his person and spit the festering smile from his mouth.

His first and most natural impulse was to curse the awkward animal that had served him such a trick, but this was of brief duration, being replaced by a sensation of terror as he felt himself sinking lower and lower into the foul-smelling bath. It seemed as though he was being dragged forcibly and resistlessly down into the loathsome depths, and the strong, sucking sensation gave him the impression of having fallen into a powerful quicksand.

For the moment this fear rendered him fairly insane, and with wild cries that were half-smothered by the mire which his frantic struggles cast up in a muddy shower around him, he fought against the horrible fate that threatened him, unknowing that he was pursuing the course most certain to end in his destruction.

The shattered crust around him crumbled beneath his spasmodic grasp. He worked his feet and legs much as a swimmer does in the act of "treading water," but as the mire was too dense for swimming, and he having nothing substantial to grasp, his blind struggles only served to sink him deeper and deeper into the slime as it grew constantly thinner by reason of the percolating water being attracted to the spot by his incessant motion.

Already he was engulfed to the armpits, and his situation was growing more desperate with the passage of every moment. There was no bottom beneath his feet, so far as he knew, and the longer his struggles continued, the greater were the exertions necessary to keep him from sinking entirely. Yet even the love of life could not make his strength hold out much longer. Despite the wild terror with which he was inspired, he knew that the end must be nigh.

Then, just as he was about to resign all hope and give over the unavailing fight against

destiny, he was given the proverbial straw of a drowning man.

His foot struck against some hard substance and—just how he managed it he never knew—then he was standing with both feet upon the end of a buried stick or branch.

The revulsion from utter despair was so great that his reasoning faculties quickly returned to him, and he was enabled to look his threatened fate fairly in the face.

He believed that he was doomed to certain death, and he even estimated his lease of life at a short half-hour.

The frail support beneath his feet was slowly but steadily sinking into the mire, and he knew that by the end of that period, provided no help—faint hope!—appeared, his breath would be forever stilled by the viscid slime which surrounded him.

He was calm now, composed almost to stoicism. He knew that his unaided struggles would only precipitate his fate, and now that the first bitterness was past, no man could look death in the face with a steadier nerve than Zenas Dawson.

He did not shout aloud for help, knowing that such a course would be suicidal. It was with great difficulty that he retained his foothold upon the sloping stick, and the exertion of shouting would almost certainly cause him to lose his balance. And then, who was there to hear and respond to his appeal? The swamp was uninhabited—he had traversed many a mile that day, since first losing his course, and not once had he crossed the track or other sign of a human being.

He felt that there was no help for him, and he resolved to meet his death in silence.

Apparently the same feeling influenced the horse.

By slightly turning his head, Dawson could catch a glimpse of his companion in misfortune.

Only its head and neck remained above the surface, and its desperate struggles had ceased, though it did not appear to be sinking any deeper into the mire.

In fact it had struck sound footing, and the mud around it was of thicker consistency than that which enveloped the young man.

Slowly the buried branch sunk, and now the head of Zenas Dawson appeared to be resting upon the slime, unsupported by any body.

"In ten minutes more—in ten minutes more I shall be a dead man!" were the words that dropped almost unconsciously from his lips.

But the next moment all thought of death was banished from his mind.

A human voice broke the deathlike stillness that hung over the swamp—a strong, clear and melodious voice, singing a popular negro air—a voice that sounded to the man who had been so stoically awaiting the approach of death, like that of an angel freshly descended from the gates of heaven!

"A nigger in Alabama lived,
Dey used to call him Joe,
Dis nigger lived to be so old,
His head war white as snow;
Dis nigger he was very rich,
De poor ones liked him well,
Dey used to go to de Alabama house,
Some stories for to tell.

CHORUS—"An' strike de toe an' heel, my lass,
An' strike de heel an' toe,
Miss Phillis am a waitin'
For her Alabama Joe."

"Help! for the love of God—help!"

No longer resigned to his hideous fate, Zenas Dawson uplifted his voice and drowned the last words of the song in a wild appeal for succor.

As he had previously reasoned, the exertion of calling aloud caused him to lose his delicate foothold upon the sunken limb, and once more he was engaged in a stern struggle for life.

There was no immediate response made to his appeal and Dawson believed that the singer had been frightened away by the agonized cry, perhaps attributing it to some one of the many fabled spirits of the swamp, striving to lure him to his eternal destruction.

But that fear had no foundation in fact. His appeal had been heard and recognized as that of a mortal in extremity by one whose back had never yet been turned upon a deserving person in time of need. And a moment later came the cheering cry:

"Stick her cut a leetle longer, stranger, an' I'll snake ye out o' thar in a monstrous hurry!"

Dawson made no reply. It required all his powers to keep his head above the surface, but sweeter sounds than these rude, unpolished words had never greeted his ears.

A tall, roughly-clad and swamp-stained man stepped out upon the edge of the deceptive opening, gingerly advancing toward the struggling man, pausing to test the ground before him at every step, dragging a long and trailing grapevine behind him.

Thanks to this precaution, he was enabled to advance to within twenty feet of the struggling man, and then, with a warning cry, dexterously flung one end of the stout vine within Dawson's reach.

"Ketch hold o' that, stranger, but don't pull

too powerful hard ontel I give the word; jest enough to stiddy you an' keep you from sinkin'—so?"

It required no little exertion of self-command to follow this advice; but Zenas Dawson was equal to the emergency, and contented himself with clinging to his end of the vine while his friend in need retreated to the other extremity and gradually put forth his strength.

At first the progress was slow, but each succeeding moment after Dawson was once started from his miry bath, rendered the task more easy, and five minutes from the time of his appearance, the stranger drew Dawson fairly up to his feet, where the ground was sound enough to support them both.

"Thar you be, stranger—not so bad hurt but what a little Jamaica an' a good deal o' water 'll set ye all to rights once more. Wish I could say as much of your hoss-critter yender."

"There's no way of getting him out, then?"

"A steamboat an' a tow-rope mought do the job, ef so be thar was one here—which they ain't," was the quiet response. "Ef 'twas my critter, a bit o' lead jest back o' the ear—"

"Better that than let him be smothered or starved to death, I suppose. You will do it? My pistols are there in the holsters, and wouldn't be of much service, even if I could reach them."

"Hope you hain't nothing o' much value thar. A feller mought manidge to git at 'em, but it'd be a p'izen nasty job—"

"Shoot the horse, and I will manage that, if you will lend me a hand with the grapevine. There are papers of importance in my saddlebags that I cannot abandon."

Without a word, but evidently highly pleased with the degree of pluck displayed by Dawson, the stranger retraced his steps to where he had left his rifle, and a moment later the death-knell of the bogged animal was sounded.

The creature's head drooped, but there was not the slightest sign of a struggle; the bullet had been planted by too sure a hand for that.

Advancing until the crust began to break, Dawson shot himself forward upon his stomach, his head bent upward and back, sliding over rather than through the slime until his advance was checked by the body of the horse.

It was no difficult matter to release the saddlebags, and flinging both them and the pistols to the firm land, he followed them after the manner already described.

"I don't know your name, stranger, an' the mud's so thick on your fizamahog that I can't tell whether you're white, black or yaller, but one thing's sartin—you ain't nigh as green as I tuck you fer. But we'll let that go ontel you're in a little better trim fer talkin'. A good wash-up wouldn't hurt you any, I don't reckon. Lucky we ain't more'n hafe a mile from the bayou, whar you kin soon git clean ag'in. Le' me take your traps—so. Don't look 's though you could do more'n to kerry yourself an' that p'izen sweet-smellin' load o' mud. Wonder ye ain't tuckered out wuss than ye be."

The stranger was evidently fond of hearing his own voice, and as Dawson was in reality too greatly fatigued after all that he had undergone, to put in more than a word or two now and then, he had matters all his own way as he led his new-found friend by an intricate but tolerably firm trail through the swamp. But at length a chance question and the answer given, wrought a sudden and utter change.

"I don't reckon you was traveling jest fer fun, when you fell into that honey-pot, stranger?"

"No, sir; I was in quest of one Stephen Craythorne, whom I was led to believe I would find somewhere in this region. Can you tell me anything about him? or where I would be most likely to find him?"

"It's not so easy layin' your finger onto a man when that man's in the swamp. Mought I ax what's your business with him?"

"That I could not tell without his consent," was the slow response, and there the conversation ceased.

The tall stranger strode forward in silence, a shadow upon his brow. He appeared to be strangely disturbed by the words just uttered, as though they nearly concerned himself.

Had Dawson been more his usual self, his suspicions might have been aroused by this sudden change, but he was worn and weary, thinking only of reaching a haven of rest.

A few minutes more carried them to the bank of the bayou alluded to, and as he recognized this fact, Dawson sunk down upon the moist earth.

And at the same moment the stranger sprang upon him, grasping him fiercely by the throat!

CHAPTER II.

RUTH AND DANDY.

"If you positively forbid my going, of course I shall obey your commands, but—I'll cry, and sulk, and faint, and have hysterics—and if that has no good effect upon your heart, stern papa, I'll run away and get married to the first man I meet by the way!"

Ruth Livingstone was a bewitching picture as she uttered the foregoing words; the first portion of the sentence was spoken with down-

cast eyes and becoming meekness, the second with a provoking pout, ending with an arch, upward glance, the peroration coming sharp and half-defiant as though the threat was not uttered altogether in jest.

Randolph Livingstone, host of the "Washington Arms" and father to the willful damsel, strove hard to maintain the position he had assumed at the outset, though long experience told him that defeat was inevitable, that when little Ruth once set her mind upon doing or having anything, there was neither rest nor peace for any one around her until her wish was gratified.

Shrugging his broad shoulders, he squared his portly form before the open window and stared blankly out upon the commonplace prospect afforded by the scattering village. But the color came and went from his face as he heard the convulsive sobs behind him, and after a few uneasy shiftings from one foot to the other, he ventured to steal a covert glance over one shoulder—and thus insured his own defeat. For, with a ringing laugh and a merry smile upon her tearless countenance, Ruth sprang into his arms, and the victory was only a question of time and coaxing.

The cause of this one-sided controversy may be briefly stated.

On the evening before, word had been brought into the village of Rushville that a dastardly crime had been committed by Stephen Craythorne, who resided some four miles north of that place. He was charged with murder by no less than three eye-witnesses to the crime. The victim was stated to be a young lawyer who had only recently come into that neighborhood, and who had been very anxious to meet with the man who now stood charged with his death.

Stephen Craythorne was by no means a popular character, and there was little hesitation in applying for a warrant to arrest him. As the only justice of the peace within reasonable distance, Randolph Livingstone, landlord of the tavern, was called upon, and the warrant was placed in the hands of James Carbry, the sheriff of the county, for execution.

Naturally enough the villagers were in a high state of excitement over the affair, and though the landlord tried hard to keep the news from the knowledge of his daughter, who he knew entertained a strong liking for Honor Craythorne, the accused man's only child, she was made aware of the facts by one who will be frequently met with in these pages, popularly known as "Dandy the Dwarf."

As her father had anticipated would be the case, Ruth insisted upon at once hastening to the aid and comfort of her friend, and through the weapons she so well knew how to bring into play, finally succeeded in overruling her parent's objections.

Though his defeat was morally certain from the moment that Ruth entered into the lists against him, the old gentleman might have made a better battle for the supremacy, had not his mind and composure been disturbed by outside influences.

He knew that the dangerous leaven which always underlies the mob element was slowly but surely working to the surface, and, speaking louder than words in looks and gestures, shadowed forth the consequences which were to follow that morning's work. He felt that serious trouble would follow the arrest of the accused, that there would be an attempt to exercise the summary law of Judge Lynch, which he was resolved to resist to the last extremity—not because he sympathized with Stephen Craythorne, or deemed him falsely accused, but being a duly authorized minister of justice, he felt bound in honor to uphold and maintain the majesty of the law.

Foreseeing trouble as he did, Randolph Livingstone consoled himself with the reflection that, after all, his defeat might prove to be a victory. At least, his idolized daughter would be out of the way of trouble and danger.

Ruth did not lose much time in rejoicing over her victory, but after a little apologetic hug and kiss, she turned toward Dandy the Dwarf, and bade him make all haste and prepare their horses for the road. Nor did her commands need repeating.

Throughout the interview which has been hinted at rather than described, this worthy had been a silent though interested spectator. Through no motives of fear or reverence, however. There were only two beings upon the face of the earth whom Dandy at all considered worthy of respect: himself and Ruth—in the order named; while he feared neither the powers above nor the powers below, much less aught that was intermediate. But from experience he was convinced that his aid was not needed, and the somewhat pompous old gentleman had too often offended by treating him as a spoiled and wayward child, for him to care about cutting short the little comedy, knowing as he did that his broad grins and exaggerated gestures of delight were like a shirt of nettles to Randolph Livingstone.

The moment Ruth addressed him, however, he sprang into activity. Few maidens ever had a more devoted cavalier than Ruth found in

Dandy, and surely none had a more remarkable one.

With wonderful celerity he accoutered two animals, one a plump, pampered-looking pony, the other a huge, long-limbed, sway backed, roman-nosed, ewe-necked, vicious-eyed brute, and met Ruth at the door as she hastily emerged.

She was too well acquainted with Dandy's humor to think of mounting from the horse-block, and with due gravity placed her little foot in his hand, springing lightly into the saddle.

For any one but Dandy the task of mounting his cross-grained brute would have been a work of time and nervous caution. But, as the gleaming white teeth flashed toward him, Dandy's hard fist drove the head back as though struck by a club, and though the little fellow could not reach the pommel, he swarmed up the broadside of his gaunt steed with all the swift dexterity of an ape.

Once mounted, his steed was fairly obedient, and as he rode along beside the fair maiden, never a king bore himself more proudly, or was more dignified than Dandy the Dwarf.

Unlike the majority of those classed as dwarfs, Dandy was not deformed in either limb or body, though rather stoutly built and heavily muscled for one of his inches—something under four feet. But there his good looks stopped.

His hair was enormously thick, of a fiery red, and only for a liberal share of oil, would have stuck out in every direction, like a blazing brush-heap on a dark night. But Godiva was not prouder of her vailing locks than Dandy of his, and the snaky coil hung far down his back.

His skin was coarse-grained, of a muddy, yellowish red hue, his small nose a decided pug; his mouth wonderfully wide, though furnished with good, even and white teeth; his eyes were of different colors, one brown, the other a light blue, but both unusually large and protuberant, and by a strange freak of nature they were wholly unprovided with lids. To obviate this, he possessed the power of turning the pupils inward, which answered very well for sleeping purposes, but by no means added to his beauty.

His bodily garniture was in perfect keeping with the rest, and it was easy to see what had given him the *nom de guerre* by which he was generally known throughout the country.

His garments were of fine, even rich material, though sadly stained and soiled with grease and swamp ooze. In his dress, and the bows knots and ends of ribbon with which it was lavishly decorated, were combined all the hues of the rainbow, and whenever a gust of wind passed him by, he strongly resembled some outlandish bird of a tropical clime preening itself.

What his birth and from whence he came, no one in the present neighborhood could tell any more than they could explain the source from whence came the money that Dandy liberally expended in decorating his person, or for the liquor which he drank like so much water. Even in his cups he kept a close tongue, supposing he had, as many believed, any dangerous secret to guard.

For over a year Dandy had been paying assiduous court to Ruth Livingstone, and appeared to firmly believe that she was over head and ears in love with him, as well as to take it for granted that their marriage was only a question of time.

From the first Ruth, in her mirthful disposition, had laughingly favored this hallucination, but ere the present time she was taught to regret the indulgent course she had pursued, growing sadly weary of the persistent harping upon one string. But attempted snubbing was in vain; Dandy had been humored too long. Like most abnormally ugly persons, he felt an implicit faith in his own powers of fascination, and really considered these repeated rebuffs as only the mock defenses of a coy maiden.

Considerable space has been given to this personage, but aside from the part he was destined to play in the tragic events soon to follow, Dandy the Dwarf was a character richly deserving a much closer study than can be given him in the limits of these pages.

"Why so thoughtful, Dandy?" asked Ruth, with an upward glance at the diminutive figure perched upon the back of the mammoth steed.

"Well, I suppose I may as well tell you," replied the manikin, in a voice that was strangely sweet and musical to emanate from such a weirdly fantastic shell. "I have been studying over the wording of a challenge to single combat—"

"And with whom, pray?" cutting short the pompous utterance of the dwarf.

"Alabama Joe," and, as he shortly enunciated the title, Dandy bent over sideways and stared keenly at the pretty face beside him.

The quick flush that dyed Ruth's fair skin, even to the roots of her raven hair, might have told a significant tale to any one less conceited than Dandy.

"You would hear of it when I shot or run him through," added Dandy, philosophically, smoothing down a straying lock of his hair, "and so I don't mind telling you about it beforehand. You may have noticed that the silly fellow has been hanging around the tavern a good deal of late days, and, as I was afraid he

would annoy you—the great, clumsy brute—I politely gave him to understand that his room was better than his company. He had sense enough to take the hint, as I believed at the time, for I saw no more of him for over a week. But yesterday, as I was passing through the border of the swamp, I came across a deserted camp, and found your name carved in three places upon the bark of a young pine."

"But how do you know *he* did it?" ventured the maiden, bending over and industriously smoothing the luxuriant mane of her pony.

"Because I found something more—a lot of verses addressed to you, and signed with his name—see?" added Dandy, holding down a paper which he produced from somewhere about his person.

Ruth took the paper without meeting his gaze, but, before she could do more than glance at its contents, the spirit of evil seemed to enter into the body of her pony, sending it here and there, plunging and cavorting like mad. Dandy's steed quickly followed suit, and when its master quelled its unruly spirit, the paper had vanished.

"I must have dropped it—I had it in my hand when Susie began cutting up," said Ruth, looking up into Dandy's face with frank, innocent eyes, that might have satisfied Doubting Thomas.

But Dandy searched for the mysteriously lost paper in vain. It never again met his eyes.

Still he was not satisfied, and gave utterance to more than one puzzled sniff as he keenly eyed his fair companion. But Ruth appeared to have entirely forgotten the matter, and talked so cheerfully and persistently that Dandy soon became himself once more.

As he neared their destination, he suddenly said:

"I have decided to be married on the second of next month—my birthday."

"And who is the happy lady?" began Ruth, as well as she could for surprise; but without listening to the end, the dwarf continued:

"That will give you time enough to get ready, particularly as there will not be much change in your manner of living. I mean to take charge of the tavern. The old gentleman is growing a little childish, and doesn't keep things just up to the mark as they should be. Of course he can live on with us, but he must learn not to interfere with whatever I may think proper and right to do—"

Ruth was too utterly dumfounded at this cool impudence to speak, and there is no telling where or when Dandy would have ended, but for an outside interference.

Two men suddenly sprung out from the underbrush and grasped both pony and horse by the bridle, bringing the travelers to an abrupt stop.

"We don't mean you no harm, Miss Livingstone," said one of the men, quickly, "only you can't go no furdur 'long this road, jist yit. Let me 'sist you to 'light."

Dandy did not take kindly to this interruption, and struck his man across the face with the free ends of his bridle-reins. Though with such a slight weapon, the blow was a smart one, and the sharp, tingling pain angered the man who had taken charge of the dwarf.

Catching Dandy by the foot, he forcibly dragged him from the saddle. The dwarf fell upon his broad shoulders, and, stung more by the insult than the fall, freed himself by one fierce kick with his disengaged foot. Then, with a force and strength really remarkable, he knocked the fellow headlong into a dense mass of briars!

CHAPTER III.

"IN THE NAME OF THE LAW."

THE birds take wing with affrighted notes. A timid hare leaves its form and darts noiselessly across the woodland road. A fox squirrel ceases its digging for food among the decaying leaves and flashes up the trunk of a stately tree, pausing at the first limb to look back and downward, chattering its indignation at thus being disturbed, while its bushy tail lends emphasis with rapid jerks and switches.

Yet not a sound other than these now recorded had broken the stillness of the summer's morning. It was through the eye, rather than ear that the natives of the woodland had taken alarm. Perhaps it was the very absence of noise—the stealthy caution of those who had stolen along below, that had so frightened the wearers of fur and feather, and warned them that something strange, some unusual event was about to transpire.

Crouching low and gliding rapidly, yet cautiously from trunk to trunk, or bush to bush, a number of men were steadily tending toward one and the same point of the compass—where stood a small but not uncomfortable or ungainly log cabin, near one edge of a limited clearing.

There was stern determination written upon those bronzed and bearded faces. Their weapons were held as though ready to promptly answer an expected demand for their services.

Their stealthy advance, the expression of their

faces, all would seem to indicate that an expected enemy was at hand; and such was the fact.

A low, faint whistle guided them, and a hand was waved from a dense mass of undergrowth, followed by an arm and then a body as the author of the signal saw his comrades stealing toward him.

"The old man is coming up the crick, jest as we reckoned he would," the man, evidently the leader of the party, said in a low, hurried tone. "I mean to git in ahead of him. You lay low until you see or hear him pass by; then snake up as nigh as you kin without danger o' bein' diskivered too soon, an' hold yourselves ready to make a break for the cabin. Mind: we've got to take him, alive an' unhurt, ef we kin,—but take him we must!"

"F he *did* do it, he'll smell a mice the minnit he lays two eyes on you, Jim Carbry. Better try to trip him up as he comes along—"

"Do as I say, an' leave the rest to me; only don't stop fer a snooze a'ter you hear me give the signal—mind that, now."

With a low laugh that was by no means as heartily nonchalant as he himself intended, James Carbry turned away and passed rapidly along a narrow, winding path that led through the thicket, emerging from which he was within two score yards of the log cabin where lived Stephen Craythorne and his only child, Honor.

The building stood in a small clearing upon a gentle slope that bordered a shallow, quiet stream whose waters finally lost themselves in the Big Black swamp.

The door was open, and Carbry caught a glimpse of a form fitting past the opening as he emerged from the covert, but that fact gave him no particular uneasiness. He knew that it was Honor Craythorne, and alone.

He gave one quick glance over his shoulder that told him his game was still leisurely approaching, seemingly unsuspecting the surprise that had so carefully been arranged for his reception.

He was still half a mile distant, and was apparently in no hurry to reach the goal of his journey, judging from the deliberate manner in which he plied his paddle.

With the dogged air of a man who has an especially disagreeable duty to perform and which he dare not shirk, James Carbry hastened up to the cabin door, where he was met by Honor Craythorne, with a pleasant smile and cordial greeting.

It was a rarely beautiful flower to blossom amid such wild and lonely surroundings, and one as good and pure as lovely.

None knew this better than rough Jim Carbry, and there was a queer choking sensation in his throat as he responded shortly to the salutation, and crossed the threshold.

A shadow chased away the bright smile upon the maiden's face, and a pained, half-regretful look came into her large, blue eyes. Few women can feel utterly indifferent to the man who has spoken words of honest love into their ears, even though that suit met with no favor, and Honor Craythorne was not an exception. Though James Carbry was rude, ignorant, homely in features and old enough to be her father, Honor Craythorne could not look back to that pleasant spring day when the rough backwoodsman laid his heart bare to her gaze, only to listen to words that, though kindly and regretfully spoken, still sent him away to the deepest recesses of the swamp, there to pass the bitterest day of his life, hiding from his kind as the sorely wounded wild beast is wont to do, without deeply regretting the wound she had been forced to inflict.

James Carbry divined much of this as he abruptly turned and saw that expression upon her face and in her eyes. His face turned as white as the sun-bronze upon it would permit, and for one instant he felt strongly tempted to flee from the spot and the bitter duty that had been assigned him. But only for a moment. The deed must be done; there was no escape.

Nor was there any time to waste. In less than five minutes now, Stephen Craythorne would be upon the spot, and before that the trap must be set.

"Honor," and as he spoke in a quick, strained voice, Carbry caught both of the maiden's hands in his own, "I'd rather give a year o' my life then to do the duty that's set afore me, but better me, who wants to be a good an' true fri'nd to you an' yourn, then any other man who, mebbe, wouldn't feel the int'rest—"

"It is not about father—no! that is him coming now—" faltered Honor, perplexed by this strange address.

"It's about him—yes. Don't speak—lis'en," uttered Carbry, hurriedly drawing her back from the door. "Thar's a black story told about him, but I don't b'lieve it kin be true. The settlement is all up an' wild about it. They said he must be 'rested, an' bein' as I'm sheriff, of course the warrant was put in my han's. I mought 'a' sent a deputy, but I reasoned a fri'nd could mebbe manidge it better, seein' the old gentleman is kinder queer, sometimes, an' when he's that-a-way, it don't take but a word to make him fly off the han'le. You won't take it

too hard o' me when I say that I must do my duty an' arrest him?"

"Arrest him—my father?" and Honor strove to free her hands, hot indignation flashing from her eyes. "Arrest him—for what?"

"They say he murdered a man—that young lawyer chap, Zenas Dawson—"

"It is false! they never met—" impulsively began the maiden, when Carbry cut her short.

"False or true, thar's only one way to bring it out, an' that is fer him to stan' his trial. I've got to arrest him, Honor, so don't make it any harder for me then it is, a'ready. The warrant reads 'dead or alive.'"

"You mean to murder him—"

"No; he sha'n't be hurt ef I kin help it. But ef you give him a hint o' what we're here fer, I cain't answer fer what follers. You know he won't lis'en to reason at times, an' ef he should kill any one o' us, it'd go ag'inst him at the trial. Better hide your feelin's an' let me take him sorter onawar's. I sw'ar by my old love fer you that he sha'n't be hurt— Hist! thar he comes! 'Member, Honor, all depends on you!"

Releasing the maiden's hands and sinking into a chair, with his back turned toward the door, James Carbry composed his features as quickly as possible, but not daring to turn around as the owner of the cabin crossed the threshold.

Stephen Craythorne was one of a thousand, in face and in form.

In height he was considerably over six feet, but his massive frame was so justly proportioned that this extreme altitude was not especially marked save when standing in close proximity to others of his kind. Yet there was no excess of fat or superfluous flesh in his composition. His muscles when in play were enormous, and, allied to a panther-like activity, it is not to be wondered at that the posse summoned by the sheriff were anxious as to the result of Carbry's bold venture alone into the lion's den.

His features were regular, but massive. There was a peculiar, almost wild light in his full, blue eyes, which were rarely at rest, swiftly roving like those of a sorely hunted wild beast.

His hair and full beard were long and white as snow, where unstained by the swamp mud or the scorching beams of the sun. His garments of coarse cloth were ragged, stained and discolored with blood and swamp ooze.

Upon his shoulder he bore the carcass of a deer, and one hand supported a long richly ornamented rifle. This, with a knife, brace of pistols and a broad-bladed, short-handled ax in his belt, completed the picture.

Stephen Craythorne stopped short and the hunted look in his eyes grew deeper as they rested upon the motionless figure of the sheriff; but this hesitation was only momentary.

Two swift strides carried him to the side of the chair, and his strong hand turned the man resistlessly around until the light fell fairly upon his face. One keen glance, then he turned away with a short grunt, not uttering a word of either apology or salutation.

But, Carbry was used to his odd humors, and as Craythorne cast his burden down in one corner, he arose and addressed the old man, with the double purpose of keeping him from noticing the agitation in the maiden's face, and to carry out the plan he had suddenly conceived as the safest.

"Mr. Craythorne, I've come over to see ef thar's any chance o' buyin' or tradin' you out o' that rifle o' yourn. It makes my eyes water every time I see it, an' ef it's as good as it's han'some, your kin jest name your own price. Le' me look at it close, ef you please."

Without waiting for an answer, Carbry drew the weapon out of the half-reluctant hands of its owner, frankly meeting the keen, suspicious glance, then drawing nearer the door, as though the better to examine the rifle.

Several turkey-buzzards were lazily floating in circles over the clearing, as though they had already scented the offal of the slaughtered deer, and the sight of these gave Carbry his cue.

Cocking the weapon, he drew it to his shoulder and following the motion of one of the filthy birds, drew trigger. The shot was an admirable one, and Carbry gave utterance to a shrill whistle as of delight, when the buzzard turned over and shot heavily down to earth, stone dead.

That whistle was the agreed upon signal between him and his posse, the members of which instantly broke cover and rushed toward the cabin.

Lucky it was that Carbry did not pause to watch the descent of the bird, for Craythorne had caught a glimpse of the men as they broke cover, and as though divining the truth, he clenched his huge fist and struck out at the sheriff's head, just as the latter turned.

Swiftly ducking, Carbry dodged past the giant, into the house, and knowing that he would be but a child in Craythorne's hands, grasped Honor by the shoulder, and drawing a pistol, placed the muzzle against her temple, shouting aloud:

"Stop! old man—stir a step or lift a finger, and that will be the death of your daughter! Sure as there is a Lord above us! I'll scatter her brains to the four winds!"

The gigantic frame slowly stooped, quivering

in every muscle, but it was not in fear or obedience to the thrilling admonition of the sheriff.

Carbry could see that. The maniacal fire in those eyes was growing deeper and more vivid. He knew that Stephen Craythorne was little better than a madman at that moment, and he felt that the next breath would find either himself or the other a dead man!

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER CATASTROPHE.

NEVER was human being more utterly bewildered or taken more completely by surprise than was the young lawyer, Zenas Dawson, as he sunk down upon the bank of the broad, muddy-watered bayou, to find the stranger who had so recently rescued him from a horrible death, suddenly transformed into a ferocious enemy whose sinewy fingers grasped him by shoulder and throat, lifting him clear of the earth, then flinging him to the ground, several yards away. Before he had time to make a single outcry or the faintest attempt at self-defense, the deed was done.

The stranger, however, did not appear in any hurry to follow up his advantage, though he drew his heavy, wicked looking knife and cast a swift glance around him, as though to guard against observation. As if satisfied, he bent over a stout dog-wood bush which grew beside him, and severed its stem with one stroke of the keen blade.

This action drew the first outcry from the lips of the fallen man, who believed that the degrading lash was about to be applied to his own person.

"Don't you touch me with that—I'll not be lashed like a dog—"

The stranger paused in his work with a broad stare of astonishment that ended in a hearty peal of side-splitting laughter.

"I ax your pardon, stranger," he managed to gasp as Dawson scrambled to his feet and confronted him with fists clenched and menacing. "I ax your pardon a thousan' times, ef I handled you a bit rough an' unsuitable to what one gentleman has the right to expect from another, but they wasn't no time fer argymentation. As it was, the p'izen critter didn't miss its jump more'n a short inch," pointing out a short, thick-bodied, stump-tailed serpent of a reddish bronze color, which the next instant lay writhing in its death-agony beneath the stick. "You flopped down 'most atop the critter, an' they ain't the kind as waits fer two axin's to take a bite. You see them p'izen-teeth? Let them once sock into ye, an' all the whisky 'tween sun-up and sun-down wouldn't keep ye from sp'ilin'."

Dawson could not refrain from shuddering as the man held up the carcass and exhibited the curved poison-fangs.

"It's a heap wuss then either the rattler or moccasin, fer it don't give no warnin', nur won't run from anythin' 'cept fire, while it kin jump twice its own len'th an' hit the bull's eye every time—kin the copperhead," he added, flinging the reptile far out into the sluggish bayou.

The young lawyer attempted to express his thanks for this second preservation of his life, but his speech was abruptly cut short.

"Thanks'll keep, stranger, ontel after you've washed a trifle o' that loud-smellin' mud off o' ye. Ef you'll jest shuck some o' your outside duds, I kin be helpin'."

This offer was at once accepted, and the stranger entered his rude dug-out, while Dawson waded into the water, the more readily to cleanse himself.

For some little time they were too busily engaged to indulge in conversation, but the stranger appeared unable to possess his tongue in peace for many minutes at a stretch, and abruptly resumed the subject he had so suddenly dropped some time before.

"It's no more'n fa'r, stranger, to tell you that I'm a close fri'nd of the man you're lookin' fer. An' bein' a fri'nd, ef hurt or harm comes to him through you, you want to keep your eyes open tight, fer Alabama Joe'll be down on your back like a thousan' o' brick—that's said an' swore to!"

"If I meant him evil, threats wouldn't hinder me from carrying out my purpose," was the quiet response. "But if Stephen Craythorne is the man I have good reason to believe, he has no cause to fear our meeting. Why should you think I meant him harm?"

"Well, stranger, I was jest puttin' two an' two together. You're a stranger in these parts; that is easy to be see'd from your gettin' lost in the swamp, an' pushin' straight into the wust part of it. And then, ag'in, from your keepin' on your critter, 'stead o' makin' it easier on both by walkin'. So much fer that."

"You was powerful anxious to find the old gentleman, or you'd 'a' bin satisfied to wait at the house ontel he come, 'stead o' settin' out on a wild-goose chase like this."

"Now take t'other side. The old man ain't the kind as grows nat'rally in these parts, fer he's a gentleman an' a scholar. Nobody ever hearn him say whar he kem from, or his reasons fer comin'. He fights shy of all strangers, an' al'ays manidges to ketch the first sight o' them. He hees spells when he is like a crazy

wild beast, an' at them times he looks cross-eyed at his best fri'nds, an' thinks they want to 'rest him fer somethin' which he never did."

"Knowin' all this as I do, what could I think when I see a stranger so anxious to find him that he runs the risk o' losin' his own life?"

During this logical summary, Zenas Dawson did not remove his steady gaze from the face of Alabama Joe, as the stranger had called himself, and his expressive countenance, now cleansed of mud, betrayed an unusually deep interest in the words he heard.

"You reason closely, friend," he said, with a smile, as Alabama Joe paused, a light in his eyes that told he expected an answer, "but you draw a wrong deduction. So far from meaning Stephen Craythorne any harm, if he is the person I firmly believe, I am carrying him the best and most welcome news that he ever heard. But you speak of the strange spells that sometimes come over him. Surely you do not mean that he is crazy?"

"No, sir—only queer—kinder off his balance, like, an' yit," he added, rubbing his chin reflectively, "ef he wasn't a close fri'nd o' mine, I'd say they was times when the old gentleman was crazier nor a bed-bug! Bein' he is a fri'nd, I'll only say he's queer—p'izen queer at times. But he's al'ays got sense enough to go away off in the woods or the swamps whenever he feels them spells a-creepin' over him, and stays thar ontel he's all right ag'in. 'Twas 'long o' one o' them, I reckon, that you didn't find him at home. I see him this mornin', at a fav'rite nest o' his'n, at sech times, not more'n two miles up the river from the mouth o' this bayou, on t'other side. You'll either find him thar, or on the road home."

"Is it too far for you to take me in your canoe?" asked Dawson, a little delicate about asking any further favor of the man who had already served him so greatly.

"That's a question you wouldn't 'a' axed ef you hed known me better," quietly responded Alabama Joe. "Of course I'll paddle you over, an' show ye whar the old gentleman mostly hangs out when he ain't to home. S'posin' he ain't thar, I'll set ye on the straight road to town—you've bin thar?"

"Yes," nodded Dawson, wondering a little at this abrupt transition.

"You stopped at the tavern, I reckon?"

"The Washington Arms—yes; and was very much pleased both with my host and the table he set."

"You saw the lady o' the house—Miss Ruth—too?"

As he asked this question, Alabama Joe averted his head and busied himself with laying out the garments he had cleansed as thoroughly as possible under the circumstances.

A shrewd suspicion struck Dawson, although he could not catch a glimpse of the other's face.

"I did," he said promptly, not without a spice of mischief; "and I was greatly surprised to find such a lovely and accomplished young woman out here in the wilderness. I watched her closely, and was not long in making up my mind that she would make a most admirable wife—"

"The devil you did!" and Alabama Joe turned sharply toward the young lawyer, who coolly added:

"—for my very good friend, Alabama Joe."

For a few moments their eyes met in silence, but Alabama Joe could see nothing but open frankness in the gaze of the other, and with a rather sheepish laugh at himself, sprung from the canoe and grasped Dawson's hand.

"Thar's nothin' to be asbamed of in ownin' up that a man is dead in love with a woman, an' you deserve that much fer the rise you tuck out o' me, jest now. Mind, stranger, I don't say as I've got the least show in that quarter, but little as my chaimce may be, I'm ready to fight fer it, let the other man be who and what he may."

"To show that you need not look upon me as a possible rival, here's a hearty wish that you may win and wear her—and I only hope I will be at the wedding."

"You've got a wife already, then, I reckon?" Dawson laughed at this bit of unconscious flattery to the fair one in question, but shook his head negatively.

"No; and until I came up here, I never felt the want of one. I'll be as frank as yourself. I was beginning to look upon you as a possible rival, when you spoke up so warmly in defense of Mr. Craythorne."

"You don't mean it—not Honor?" eagerly exclaimed Alabama Joe.

"I do," quite as earnestly replied the young lawyer. "I have seen but little of the young lady, but enough to decide me upon trying my best to win her for my wife—provided, of course, that she is not already engaged."

There was a note of interrogation about this last proviso, and coolly as he had spoken, Alabama Joe saw that Dawson was awaiting his answer with no little internal anxiety. He was tempted to retaliate in kind, but good-nature got the better of his sense of humor.

"You ain't got anythin' to fear on that point, stranger. The old gentleman's bein' sorter on-settled in the upper story's kinder kept the boys

away. Thar was one—Jim Carbry, the sheriff; a good sort o' feller, ef he didn't crook his elbow so of'en—but the little gal didn't cotton to him, an' finally give him the sack. No, you'll find it cl'ar runnin' fer that stake, an' ef you land it, a winner, thar's only one man 'tween sun-up an' sun-down as'll hev enny right to be as proud as you—an' that's the man as marrys Ruth Livingstone—God bless her!"

Despite his well-worn calico shirt and rough woolen clothes, so stained and soiled by day travel and night sleeping in the swamps that their original color could only be doubtfully guessed at, the young lawyer at that moment felt that in all his life he had never met a finer specimen of masculine humanity than was presented to his gaze in the person of Alabama Joe.

He had removed his hat and cast a reverent glance upward as he pronounced the heartfelt blessing upon the maiden whom he so dearly loved, thus revealing his full, high brow, clear-skinned and white as polished marble where shielded from the sun. His eyes were large, of a deep blue color. His nose was clear-cut, and just aquiline enough to lend an expression of bold, fearless determination to a face that would otherwise have been almost too beautiful for that of a man.

A heavy, yet silken beard and mustaches concealed the rest of his features, and mingling with his long, curling hair, both of the same rich yellow tinge, lent a peculiarly leonine look to his head and shoulders.

Set this head upon a strong-built and muscular yet graceful body, the whole just rising six feet, and weighing two hundred pounds, and you have a fair idea of Alabama Joe's personal appearance.

There was but little more said at that time by the new-made but already firm friends.

The afternoon was waning fast, and Dawson had no especial desire to pass the night in the swamps.

He donned his still wet clothes, and took a small flat package, wrapped in oilskin, from his mud-besmeared saddle-bags, and carefully stored it away in his breast-pocket, then entered the canoe.

The little craft was very crank, being simply hollowed out of a pine log, retaining the natural curve on sides and bottom, without any show of keel or other steadying appliance.

Alabama Joe appeared to be perfectly at home in the affair, but Dawson fairly held his breath as they shot swiftly down the bayou under the long, steady impulse of the paddle, afraid to move a muscle lest the dug-out should be upset.

His fears were quickly realized, only a few rods from the mouth of the bayou.

They were passing under a tree that leaned far out over the water, when a small snake fell from above, landing fairly in Dawson's lap.

Instinctively he sprung to his feet—then both he and Alabama Joe were cast headlong into the water.

Luckily they were both exceptionally good swimmers, and there was nothing to fear on that score.

So unexpected was the accident, that Alabama Joe had not time to grasp his rifle, and the moment he saw that Dawson was in no danger, he bethought himself of recovering it.

"Swim to shore, an' I'll fetch the canoe as soon as I kin git my rifle," he cried, but Dawson shook his head, laughingly.

"Not any more in mine! I'll swim on over, as I can't well get any wetter. I'll wait for you on the other side."

Alabama Joe watched him until satisfied that there was no doubt of his ability to swim a much greater distance unaided, then ducked his head and dove to the bottom of the bayou in quest of his weapon.

This took more time than he had counted upon, as the bottom was covered with dense moss and water plants, but after half a dozen descents he succeeded in bringing up the weapon.

Swimming with it to the canoe, he supported the rifle upon the bottom of the overturned dug-out, then pushed them before him to shore, which he reached without difficulty.

As he emerged from the water, he was startled by hearing the sharp explosion of a rifle, coming from the opposite side of the river.

He rushed to the point of land just in time to see a man drag a body up out of the water.

And he knew that the body was that of the young lawyer whom he had so recently rescued from a horrible death in the swamp.

CHAPTER V.

MINISTERING ANGELS.

WITH a single stroke of his tightly clenched fist Dandy the Dwarf knocked his assailant backward and headlong into a dense mass of briars, then sprung quickly aside, as though expecting an attack from the fallen man's comrade, drawing and cocking a serviceable looking pistol at the same time.

But the latter made no attempt to avenge the discomfiture of his mate, and waved his hand deprecatingly toward the belligerent dwarf, uttering with a good-humored laugh:

"I won't take any in mine, Dandy, if you please. It's you and Dave for it, and I reckon he's able to hoe his own row."

Dandy knew the speaker well enough to feel assured that he was speaking the truth about himself, and so unhesitatingly devoted the whole of his attention to the other man, who, by a vigorous if not particularly graceful use of his legs, had by this time succeeded in extricating himself from the brier-bush, scratched and bleeding, fearfully angry, though he could scarcely have told at what, so thoroughly had the unexpected reverse obfuscated his reasoning powers.

But Dandy was lacking in wit no more than he was in courage, and quickly availed himself of the animated breastwork afforded by his rawboned steed.

Darting to its further side, he squatted down so as to command a fair view of his adversary beneath the animal's body, and promptly covered the man with his pistol, calling out sharply:

"Knuckle down, Dave Heaton, or by the sword of Gideon! I'll make your wife a widow, and give her a chance to marry a man, the next time."

The fellow was no coward, and though reason would have told him that his life was held at the finger-tips of the grinning dwarf, he crouched low down with the evident intention of springing upon Dandy. This he would doubtless have done, and equally as certain he would have been checked by a bit of lead from the leveled pistol, had not the other man boldly sprung between the twain, facing his mate with a stern rebuke that quickly brought him to his sober senses.

"Drop it, Dave—we're here to keep all quiet, not to raise a row. Mind that!"

"The pliz n little imp struck me—"

"Just as I would have done in his place. You brought it all upon yourself by your rudeness. Mind, you've got to walk over me before you can make any more row here. After our duty is accomplished, you can follow the quarrel up or not, just as you choose. I've nothing to do with that."

"I am not hard to find by any one who has any business of importance with me," said Dandy, with no little importance in his tones and bearing. "If Mr. David Heaton considers his honor wounded by the blow he has received, I am ready at all times to render him the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another, on foot or on horseback, with any weapon from a pistol to a howitzer, a darning needle to a lance—anything short of an earthquake or a hurricane!"

Without waiting to hear the whole of Dandy's rodomontade, James Henshaw turned to Ruth Livingstone, with whom he was slightly acquainted, and briefly explained the reasons for thus interrupting their ride.

He and Heaton belonged to the posse summoned by Sheriff Carbry to aid him in arresting Stephen Craythorne for murder, and they had been stationed to check or turn back any persons coming from the village, lest the alarm should be given Honor Craythorne, who might thus be enabled to warn her father of the threatened arrest, and so the ends of justice be defeated.

He had barely given this explanation, when the cautious signal given by Carbry, as mentioned in a previous chapter, came to their ears, and a few moments later one of the posse brought them word that the game was afoot, and that they were all to close in, ready to advance at their leader's signal, in case he should stand in need of assistance.

Observing Henshaw's discomposure, and readily divining from what cause it proceeded, Ruth said:

"You need not be afraid to trust us, Mr. Henshaw. I promise for Dandy and myself that we will not make any trouble—though if I could warn Mr. Craythorne in time, I would do so—and I hope he will beat you all soundly!"

Henshaw laughed at this characteristic ending, but he knew that he might implicitly rely upon the pledge thus given, and together with the two men, stole forward toward the log-cabin.

Lying low in the dense undergrowth, and watching until the gigantic figure of Stephen Craythorne passed unsuspectingly by their ambush on his way to the house, the men then stole cautiously forward as close to the building as they could without incurring too great a risk of discovery.

From thence they saw Carbry step to the door and shoot the winged scavenger, and, as the agreed upon signal came to their ears, one and all arose from their coverts and dashed at full speed toward the cabin.

They saw how adroitly the sheriff frustrated the assault upon himself by Craythorne, and, though there was a fine prospect ahead of broken bones, if no worse, not a man hesitated or faltered.

Lucky it was for James Carbry that this was the case, for his action in grasping Honor and threatening her life as a protection to his own, only served to still further infuriate the giant.

One moment's delay on the part of those coming to the rescue would have been fatal to one or both of the adversaries. Of course Carbry would not have injured the maiden whom he loved, even to save his own life, and because he loved her he was especially reluctant to injure her father. Yet he knew that if the hands of the maddened giant once closed upon his person, death alone could break their hold.

Fortunately for all concerned, matters were not suffered to reach this extremity. Carbry, in view of a possible resistance, had carefully selected his men, and reaped the reward of his forethought now.

A small, but lithe and muscular fellow reached the doorway first, bearing in his hand a stout rope. There was no time to waste in forming a running noose, so he cast the bight of the rope over the head of the crouching giant, then, flinging his whole might and strength into the effort, jerked his captive over backward with stunning force.

Craythorne fell with his head and shoulders outside the building, and this awkward position, together with the severe shock he had sustained, rendered the task of securing him far more easy than would have been the case under less disadvantageous circumstances. Still the capture was not effected without a stern, furious and prolonged struggle, and the half-score men were pretty well breathed when their work was done.

Carbry did not engage in the struggle; for, as she saw her father overthrown and buried beneath an active mass of enemies, poor Honor gave one piercing shriek, then sunk a dead weight upon the arm of her rejected lover.

The sheriff was quickly relieved of his precious burden however, for, when she heard that shriek, Ruth Livingstone forgot her pledge in anxiety for her dearly beloved friend.

Followed closely by Dandy, she dashed up to the building and passed over, rather than by the still struggling men. With one and the same motion she pushed Carbry aside and took the senseless form from his arms, bearing it to the bed with a strength lent by the emergency.

Her cheeks were burning, her eyes flashing, as she turned upon Carbry, pointing to the door: "Go! your work here is done—unless you war upon helpless women, also!"

"Back!" cried Dandy, gliding before Ruth, as the sheriff made a step toward the bed. "If it's only a woman that speaks, there's a man here to see that her words are obeyed."

Carbry paused, though it was not on account of the threatening attitude assumed by the dwarf. Indeed it may be doubted whether he either saw him or heard his words.

This arrest had been the hardest piece of duty he had ever been called upon to perform. Not because of the danger involved. For that he cared as little as any man could. But he loved Honor Craythorne more dearly than life itself, nor, though once firmly rejected, had he abandoned all hope of eventually winning her. And in performing his sworn duty, he knew that he was crushing out the last faint hope of ever gaining his desire. He knew that she could never again regard him with even commonplace friendship.

It was hard to turn his back forever upon that dead hope, without one word or parting look, but this he did, only saying to Ruth:

"Keep her here as long as you can—don't let her come to the village if you can help it. I'll do all I can to save the old man, but I'm afraid it's a black case against him."

From the moment that he found his desperate efforts were unavailing, Stephen Craythorne ceased his struggles. From the first he had not said a word, and he maintained the same silence now. He seemed to be holding a rigid guard over his tongue, as though he was in possession of some important secret which he feared would escape him, did he trust himself to speak aloud.

Dandy watched the posse until they disappeared from view with their prisoner, then turned toward Ruth. Between them they soon succeeded in restoring Honor to consciousness, but it was only for a brief space. As her mind recalled what had occurred, she uttered a piteous wail of agonized despair, and again swooned away.

It was during this prolonged period of insensibility that Dandy promulgated one of his truly startling conceptions. With an air of deliberate gravity that was indisputable proof of his sincerity, he said:

"I don't know, after all, whether it would be worth while to shoot Alabama Joe. He's not such a bad fellow, if he is rather slack-baked, and can be put to better use than feeding the buzzards. It just occurred to me, looking at her. She is all alone in the world, only for the old man, and it's more than likely that he will be hung. Then why shouldn't Alabama Joe marry her?"

While speaking, Dandy drew nearer to Ruth, who was sitting beside the bed, and slipping his arm around her, the manikin attempted to steal a kiss.

It may have been something in his words that nettled her, but be that as it may, the presumptuous dwarf received a buffet from Ruth's

hand that made him reel, and sent him out-doors in a fit of the sulks.

It was fully two hours before Honor Craythorne regained her senses sufficiently to realize all that had occurred. Then she insisted upon arising and going at once to the village in quest of her father.

In vain Ruth tried to shake her determination. The girl would listen with a sad, wan smile, but still continued her preparations.

Ruth saw that nothing short of absolute force could baffle this resolution, and that she could not bring herself to use, though Dandy broadly hinted at his willingness to act the part of jailer.

With the resolve to take Honor at once to the tavern, where others might prevail upon her, Ruth retarded rather than assisted her friend, all she dared, in her preparations for departure.

But at length even her wit could conceive no further excuse for delay, and resigning her pony to Honor, Ruth mounted Dandy's steed, the dwarf preceding them on foot.

Dandy had apparently forgotten the repulse he had received, and was in unusually high spirits, perhaps over the admirable plan he had conceived of ridding himself of a presuming rival.

Like many a lover of larger growth, Dandy was never averse to showing himself and his accomplishments off before the eyes of his lady fair, and he improved the present occasion to the utmost, though in rather a fantastic manner.

A carefully trained monkey could not have exhibited a greater variety of tricks than he, running the risk of breaking his neck a dozen times, all for an approving glance which he did not receive.

Ruth was not in the proper humor for enjoying his follies, and at length even Dandy perceived that his eccentric exhibition was not appreciated as it deserved. A little sullenly he led the way, probably meditating upon the capriciousness of her—woman nature.

Yet these reflections did not entirely sour the milk of human kindness in his breast, for as they neared the point from whence the first glimpse could be caught of the village, he ran swiftly on ahead, and made the discovery he had dreaded all along.

One glance only—then he turned and checked the further progress of his fair followers, crying:

"There's a mad dog coming—turn back! We must go around some other way—quick!"

But his face told a different tale, which Honor was only too quick to read, and eluding his grasp at her bridle, she rode swiftly forward, a piercing scream of agony breaking from her lips as she saw the spectacle!

CHAPTER VI.

A TRIAL WITH CLOSED DOORS.

THE suspicions entertained by Randolph Livingstone that serious trouble was brewing, soon received ample confirmation in the report of a trusty friend.

How started or by whom he did not know, but the belief was steadily gaining ground that this crime of murder was not all of which Stephen Craythorne might rightly be accused.

No State, at that day, suffered more severely from lawless characters—river-pirates, counterfeiters, horse-thieves, foot-pads and rascals of almost every denomination—than did Mississippi; and there were few sections more bitterly cursed in that respect than the swamp country lying between the Yazoo and Big Black rivers. Robberies, thefts and desperate assaults were of almost daily occurrence, and rarely indeed was it that punishment followed such crimes. Not but arrests were frequently made, and in some few instances punishment was inflicted, but this was almost invariably in the case of an obscure criminal, who had no friends.

The great majority of cases were never brought to trial, the prisoner usually escaping or being rescued soon after his arrest, while of those that were, not one out of a score were convicted. So flagrant did these mockeries of justice become, that the honest portion of the settlers finally resolved to become law-breakers, as the only hope of obtaining redress for their many wrongs and injuries.

For this purpose various companies of Regulators and Vigilantes were organized, their meetings being conducted with great secrecy, each member being oath-bound not to betray the identity of any of his comrades, and sworn to fearlessly execute the sentence pronounced upon any criminal by the majority.

It was the firm belief of many that there was a gigantic league throughout the river and South-western States, embracing all branches of crime, and subsequent events fully confirmed this idea. The explosion which came, and the truly astounding disclosures which followed, have not been forgotten, and the facts need not be recalled now.

Let it suffice that, soon after Stephen Craythorne was charged with the assassination of Zenas Dawson, it began to be whispered that he was an influential member of this mysterious league, and that even were he brought to trial, justice would assuredly be cheated of its dues,

provided the law was allowed to take its own course.

Who started the rumor, nobody appeared to know or care, but it was instantly accepted as the truth, and the little knots of dark-browed men began to draw together and form a whole with an air of stern, deadly resolve that spoke far louder than words.

Randolph Livingstone listened in silence to this report, and as a recognized minister of the law, he felt that he must prevent the impending outrage, or stand disgraced forever, in his own estimation at least.

Although he believed Stephen Craythorne guilty of the crime with which he stood accused, he determined that he should not be punished unless first found guilty by a legal trial.

Knowing that his presence among them would insure silence and reserve as to their purpose, Livingstone sent back his friend to learn if possible just what the plans of the enemy were, and to find out which, if any, of the settlers could be trusted to aid the law, in case of need.

This friend, whose name has not been preserved, was fully equal to the duty assigned him, and ere long returned with his report.

The leaders of the mob had resolved to wait and watch until the sheriff and his prisoner should come in view, then charge upon the posse and seize the criminal by force of arms, if necessary, though the belief appeared to be general that Carbry would quietly surrender his charge when he saw that resistance against such an overpowering force could only result in his own destruction.

"There's less than a dozen men on whom we can depend," added the spy.

"Those, with Carbry's posse will be enough," coolly responded the justice. "Do you go and have them ready to join forces with us, but be careful only to speak to those whom you know are reliable. I will steal away and ride to meet the sheriff."

Taking all things into consideration, no better plan could have been devised, and the two worthies at once set about performing their parts.

Thoroughly arming himself, Randolph Livingstone hastened to the stables, situated in the rear of the tavern, and prepared his best horse for the road, intending to leave the stable yard by a rear entrance, by which means he believed he could reach the corner of the adjacent woods unperceived, or, at least, without his purpose being suspected until it was too late for him to be intercepted. But he was fated not to succeed in his designs so easily.

As he took one glance around to see if the coast was clear he noted a sudden commotion among the group of settlers in the distance, and from the wild yell that arose from their midst, he felt assured that the self-created avengers of blood had caught sight of their intended victim.

The landlord was prompt to execute as he was quick to devise, and leading forth his horse he sprung into the saddle and clearing the closed gate with the bold and graceful dash that had been the envy of many an old fox-hunter in the Old Dominion ere declining fortunes had forced him to migrate and begin life anew, Squire Livingstone thundered down the road and past the excited mob before they could divine his purpose and bar his way. Then a leaden hail was sent after him.

To do the Regulators justice, none of those bullets were aimed at the man, their purpose being to kill or cripple the horse alone, and thus prevent the landlord from joining the sheriff.

Livingstone felt his mount jump spasmodically, and knew that the poor beast had been struck by at least one of the missiles, and instinctively freed his feet from the stirrup-irons so as to fall clear of the falling animal. But, though wounded unto death, the noble creature darted on with the speed of an arrow, and rapidly distanced the pursuers.

Luckily there was not a great distance for it to cover.

The sheriff had halted with his prisoner on hearing the loud outcry and succeeding fusillade. At first sight of the mounted fugitive, he fancied there had been another crime committed, or, perhaps an escape from the log-jail, and he directed several of his men to scatter in order to intercept the horseman, but in another instant he recognized the landlord, and the truth flashed upon him.

Consequently there was little loss of time in coming to an understanding when Livingstone reached the party and dismounted from his dying horse.

There was no thought of yielding up the prisoner, though they were so greatly outnumbered, even while scarcely one of the little party but believed he had committed a heinous crime richly deserving death.

"Close around the prisoner, boys," said Carbry, in a sharp, quick tone. "Don't let it be said that we was skeered out o' our duty by a pack o' drunken brutes. Shoulder to shoulder, but don't burn powder afore I give the word. So—forward!"

With the justice and sheriff a few paces in advance, the party steadily advanced, and their bold front in a measure demoralized the mob,

which had counted upon little or no opposition. Still, though they made no positive opposition to the advance, they still kept a strong force between the posse and the village, while others fairly surrounded the little company with angry cries and threatening demonstrations, growing more excited each moment.

Livingstone saw this, and halted the posse. "You know me, my friends," he cried aloud, "and know that I am a man of my word. Let me tell you, then, that I never was more earnest in my life than now, when I swear by all that men hold holy, that we have one and all resolved to defend the prisoner to the death. He shall have a fair trial, according to law, and if found guilty shall suffer the just penalty of his crime. But, by the living Jehovah! the first man who dares to lay a finger upon him in anger, before he is found guilty, I will kill with my own hand!"

"We're here to back up his words, boys," cried Jim Carbry, resolutely. "Clear the way, now, or somebody's goin' to git hurt, sure!"

Whether it was that these bold speeches cowed them, or that the leaders of the mob had concluded to follow some less dangerous course, they melted away from in front and offered no further opposition to the advance, though the defenders did not relax their vigilance until the door of the tavern was reached.

Here another and still greater surprise awaited the unruly assemblage. The doors and heavy shutters of the windows were closed and secured, while the sheriff and three of his deputies stood upon the broad veranda, with the evident purpose of keeping it clear of intruders. Still, it was not until Carbry, from a written list, read aloud the names of twelve men and bade them come forward to serve as jurors, that the mob realized the truth; that there was to be a trial with closed doors.

The men summoned—it was remarked that not one of them had joined in the demonstration against the prisoner—promptly came forward, and then the sheriff advanced and secured the three witnesses who were expected to prove the commission of the murder.

All this was accomplished so quickly that there was no chance of interference, even had the Regulators dared to attempt such, until jury and witnesses were inside the tavern, and Carbry once more standing guard before the closed door.

Carbry smiled quietly at the growling curses that were showered upon him by the angry mob, but only spoke when it became necessary to warn back some bolder intruder. He could see that some evil spirits were at work among the men, but undauntedly maintained his position for over an hour, when the door opened and Squire Livingstone emerged and raised his hand in token of his wish to address them.

"Gentlemen," he began, "it is only right that you should know the conclusion we have arrived at in this matter, and the reasons which have influenced us.

"In the first place, the prisoner is undoubtedly insane, and refuses to plead—cannot be induced to utter a word. Still, we heard the evidence the witnesses had to offer, but there is one important link missing. Until the dead body of the alleged murdered man is found, there can be no conclusive evidence that murder has been committed. Until a close search can be made for the body, the accused shall remain in custody."

His speech was cut short by a fierce yell of execration, and a rifle-shot rang out sharply above the tumult.

CHAPTER VII.

MOB LAW TRIUMPHANT.

THE rifle-shot came from beyond the main crowd, and there could be no doubt at whom the missile had been aimed.

With a sharp, half-checked ejaculation of mingled rage and pain, the sheriff staggered back against the closed door, one hand seeking his breast and being immediately dyed scarlet with the hot blood that spurted from the wound.

A blood-red mist danced before his eyes. The startled shouts of the mob sounded far-off and indistinct to his ears. There was a strange weakness stealing over him, which he believed was death, claiming him for its victim.

Like all men of his class and training, James Carbry was reluctant to die unavenged. He had neither time nor power to reason. His mental faculties had been almost utterly paralyzed by the treacherous shot. He heard the angry yells of the mob still ringing in his ears, and believed that some one of their number had sounded his death-knell. But they should pay the price.

With a mighty effort he drew his revolver and faced the mob, discharging shot after shot into their midst in a blind, aimless manner.

Nothing more fatal to the cause he was trying to defend, could have occurred.

With a few exceptions the mob was composed of honest men whose better judgment had been blinded by the specious arguments of a few rascals who thought only of accomplishing their own ends.

If unresisted, they would have lynched the prisoner, believing him guilty of a crime richly deserving death, but most assuredly they did not contemplate a dastardly assassination like this, and had Carbry fallen dead, or acted otherwise than as he did, they would have turned upon the assassin and never have known rest until the fall of the sheriff had been fully avenged.

But this was not to be. Blindly as he had fired into the crowd, the first two shots of the wounded sheriff found their victims. One man fell dead, shot through the brain, while another shrieked aloud in bitter agony as the lead shattered his knee joint.

The provocation was forgotten. The mob only remembered that they were being fired upon—that their blood was being shed—and with fierce yells of rage, loud cries of vengeance, they charged.

All this occurred almost with the rapidity of thought and before Randolph Livingstone could fairly realize what had occurred, or raise a hand to check the fatal impulse of the wounded man, the harm was done.

He saw the furious rush, and knew that it would be worse than folly to attempt any resistance there, unarmed and unaided. Once inside the building, with stout doors and shutters barricaded, they might make a good stand and stout defense.

The ragged bullets were whistling viciously past his head, but the landlord would not desert his wounded comrade. He grasped Carbry by the arm, urging him to enter the tavern, but the man turned upon and grappled with him like an unreasoning wild beast, confounding his friend with his enemies.

His desperate longing for revenge lent the wounded man a degree of strength such as had never been his in his palmiest days, though it fled as quickly as it came. Still, it was sufficient to defeat the purpose of Randolph Livingstone. Despite his stoutest endeavors he could neither drag Carbry into the door, nor free his throat from the vise-like grip that was fastened upon it.

Then they both fell heavily, close to the outer edge of the veranda, poised there for an instant of time, then rolled down the short flight of steps, to be trampled upon by the howling mob as they swarmed up the veranda and hurled themselves against the closed door.

Less than one minute had elapsed since the firing of the first shot, and those within the tavern had hardly realized that the threatening storm had burst in deadly earnest. It was instinct alone that caused them to rush toward the hall door, rather than any idea of repelling the oncoming foe. But they were saved the trouble of opening the barrier.

On stepping outside to announce the result of the preliminary examination to the disorderly crowd, Livingstone had simply drawn the door to behind him, not suspecting anything like that which followed. Hence, with their first rush, the door yielded and several of the foremost men went down in a heap upon the floor, together with one or two of the inmates.

Naturally enough a panic ensued among those who, under more favorable circumstances, would have defended the building and the prisoner to the death, and fearing lest they should come in for a share of the tender mercies of the enraged mob, they fled for dear life.

Stephen Craythorne alone acted differently. He was free from bonds, but made no attempt to escape until the yelling mob burst into the room. Until then he was more like a stone statue, than a man of flesh and blood. But then a complete change came over him.

As the mob rushed toward him, with fierce, significant cries—the yell for blood!—he grasped the heavy chair upon which he had been leaning, and cast it with terrific force full at the heads of the oncoming avengers.

There was no dodging such a swift and unexpected missile, and three or four of the leaders went down before it, effectually disposed of for the time being.

In the confusion which followed, Craythorne turned and leaped through one of the windows, carrying the sash with him and bursting the closed shutters from their fastenings.

Whether the descent was greater than he had anticipated, or whether he had lost his balance in bursting through the stout barrier, Craythorne was stunned by the fall, and ere he could renew his attempt at flight, he was bound, hand and foot, a noose placed around his neck and a dozen men, for the time being transformed into veritable fiends, grasping the rope and about to drag him over the ground to the nearest tree.

But Stephen Craythorne was not fated to die so soon. Two men sprung to his side and severed the rope, then confronted the ruffians with cocked and leveled revolvers.

"Don't let it be said that we are assassins, boys," cried the younger and taller of the twain. "Give the man a fair trial before Judge Lynch, and then if found guilty, no one can blame you for hanging him."

For one instant it seemed as though the two bold men had only sealed their own doom, without at all benefiting the prisoner; but then one

or two others from the crowd joined in the cry for a fair trial, and the crisis was past, though there were concessions made upon both sides.

Those men who had been injured by the chair flung at their heads, and more particularly the man who had been rendered a cripple for life by the blind firing of the sheriff, clamored loudly for vengeance upon the cause of their pains, nor were they pacified by the assurance of the cooler-headed that their wrongs should be remembered in the sequel, nor until it was agreed that Craythorne should first be trussed up and flogged. Whoever made this suggestion, it was eagerly agreed to by the majority, and as promptly carried out.

Until now, Stephen Craythorne had not spoken a word since his first being taken prisoner, but as he was dragged out to the nearest tree and stoutly strapped to its trunk, his tongue was loosened and he begged the mob to kill him at once, rather than disgrace him by whipping.

He might as well have tried to whistle down a hurricane. The mob was not to be defrauded of its ferocious sport by empty words.

There was no lack of willing hands to perform the work; rather the contrary. Each one appeared eager to strike a blow at the defenseless victim.

The shirt was torn and cut from his back.

Then the word was given. The supple rod hissed through the air and fell upon the bared shoulders with a soul-sickening sound—a livid wale made its appearance upon the white skin; then blow followed blow in rapid succession, each followed by a bloody spray.

This was the sight that, meeting the eyes of Honor Craythorne as she emerged from the timber, drew from her lips a piercing scream of torture, that could not have been more acute had the cruel blows fallen upon her own person. But so wholly were the Regulators absorbed in their bloody work that not one of them noticed the approach of the trio, their first intimation of the fact being the swift and resistless passage through their midst of a horse and rider.

Several were flung heavily to the ground, and all were thoroughly startled. Under the impression that a rescue was being attempted, weapons were drawn and fierce cries uttered, before the rider was recognized.

It was Honor Craythorne, usually so timid but now rendered fearless as a lioness defending her cubs, by the sight of her father, bruised and bleeding, helpless in the midst of his pitiless foes.

She leaped to the ground, struck down the blood-dripping rod, flung her arms around the prisoner, as though to shield him with her own frail body, and looked defiance at the motley crowd.

Only for a moment did she stand alone. As the angry cries arose, a tall young man leaped to her side, a pistol in each hand and bold words on his lips.

"Back!" he cried, his voice ringing out like a clarion. "Back! the first hand that is raised against this lady, I will lay low in death!"

At this juncture, Ruth and Dandy came up, and Honor had three defenders instead of one.

"And you call yourselves men—for shame!" cried Ruth, her cheeks pale, but her eyes flashing with angry contempt as they glanced around upon the sullen faces of the Regulators. "If I was a man, I'd thrash—I'd kill you every one!"

"The man ain't lacking," coolly said Dandy, balancing a pistol in his hand as he stepped before the irate beauty. "Just tell me the one to begin with, Miss Livingstone, and I'll work an eyelet hole in his bosom, instanter."

But the order was not given, for at that instant Honor sunk to the ground with a faint moan, her strength exhausted by the severe ordeal. Ruth saw that she had swooned again, and was truly grateful when the young stranger gently lifted the senseless maiden in his arms, saying:

"She needs your care, and you can effect nothing more here. Please show me where to carry her, then I will return and defend this unfortunate man with my life, if needs be."

"To the tavern, yonder—I will run ahead and see that a place is prepared."

"Run after her," hurriedly said the stranger to the dwarf. "Her father is lying there, either dead or badly hurt—"

But Ruth had made the discovery herself, and a gasping cry broke from her lips as she recognized the form of the landlord lying near the foot of the stairs, where he had fallen beneath the heavy, trampling feet of the mob as it rushed over him and the sheriff.

The stranger hesitated for a moment, then turned aside to a small house, from the partly open door of which he observed a woman's head protruding, and effecting an entrance despite the evident reluctance of the owner of the head, gently deposited his fair burden upon a bed.

"Give the lady what care and attention she requires, and please accept this trifle for your trouble."

The trifle was several gold pieces, the sight and touch of which wrought a remarkable

change in the demeanor of the sallow, sour-faced woman.

Satisfied that Honor would be cared for, the young man left the house and hastened across to where Ruth and Dandy were kneeling beside the bruised and blood-stained form of Randolph Livingstone. Stooping, he made a quick but apparently satisfactory examination of the injured landlord, saying, as he straightened up:

"I do not think you have cause for serious fear, lady. I can discover no injuries but what time and nursing will heal. There is a broken arm—but nothing more serious. But we must get him into the house and upon a bed."

"I can carry half if you can manage the other," quoth Dandy, and so it was arranged.

As Ruth passed, Carbry uttered a faint groan, and when the still insensible form of the landlord was placed upon a bed, she begged Dandy and the stranger to also bring in the wounded sheriff.

Her wishes were promptly obeyed, and in answer to her inquiring look as they returned, Dandy shook his head positively.

"He might as well have made an end of it out there," he said, shortly. "I've spoiled my clothes, and ruined a good bed, all for nothing."

"You mean—he is not dead?" she faltered.

"No, not dead," softly replied the stranger, to whom her words had been addressed. "But there is very little hope for him, I fear—in fact, none. He will not live to see the sun set."

CHAPTER VIII.

A TRIAL IN THE OPEN AIR.

WITH feelings the reverse of amiable, Dandy the Dwarf noted the expression of strong admiration that beamed from the dark eyes of the stranger as they met the upturned gaze of the fair maiden while answering her question concerning the wounded sheriff. He saw, too, the deepening glow upon Ruth's cheek as her eyes soon drooped beneath that steady, burning gaze.

It would not be exactly correct to say that Dandy was jealous. That sentiment would hardly agree with his overweening confidence in his charms of person and powers of fascination. But he foresaw a possible rival in the handsome stranger, and deemed it no more than honorable and just to give him fair warning of the danger he was incurring without the faintest prospect of reward.

The stranger silently obeyed the slight touch upon his arm and the significant look given him by Dandy, following the dwarf into the hall.

"Falling in love with an angel at first sight is your misfortune, not your fault, Sir Knight," uttered the manikin in a grave tone that sounded like the deep booming of a musically toned bell. "Hence this warning. Shun yonder maiden as though she were deadly poison, and your years may be long in the land. Refuse, and you will only make one more of the long list of noble knights who have already fallen victims to her fatal charms—and the might of my arm."

"What under the sun are you trying to get through you, anyhow?" impatiently demanded the astonished stranger, eying Dandy as though he strongly suspected the little fellow's brain was cracked.

"Just this," snapped the manikin, descending to every-day speech in his feeling of disgust at having cast his pearls before swine. "That lady is my promised wife, and if you come strutting around her too often you'll get your comb cut—sure!"

A low, mocking laugh was the only answer vouchsafed to this threat as the stranger turned and abruptly left the tavern. Dandy, his choler rising, would have followed after, but Ruth, who had overheard the words and laugh, called to him sharply, and he obeyed.

On emerging from the tavern, the stranger was met by the short, heavy built man who had joined him in cutting the noose from around Stephen Craythorne's neck. He was greatly excited, and spoke rapidly:

"They're gittin' ready to try the old man over thar, but unless somebody that's got a slick an' knowledgeable tongue speaks up fer him, he won't hev a ghost of a show. So I come fer you."

"Why so? I never met either of you before to-day."

"I thought—but you took his part—"

"Just as I would that of any man, however great a criminal, whom I saw about to be killed without a chance given him to speak for himself. He has that chance now, and must make the most of it. Though we lawyers are accustomed to fight against heavy odds, I am not anxious to waste my breath in a case where judgment has already been pronounced."

At the word lawyer, the short man thrust his hand into his bosom and produced a plethoric wallet.

"Name your fee, and consider yourself retained as counsel for the prisoner," he said quickly, in a sharp business-like tone, but unconsciously dropping the rude pronunciation he had hitherto employed.

The quick, suspicious glance of the other first made him aware of this fact, and his bronzed

face flushed hotly, though neither of them alluded to the slip. Still his words produced the effect desired, and before the grove of trees to which the Regulators had taken their prisoner was reached, a bargain was struck between Lee Ovelman and Galusha Evergreen, by which the former was to defend Stephen Craythorne.

The judge and jury had already been chosen, and the prisoner, still in bonds and held by two stout men in an upright position before the judge, was being asked whether or no he was guilty of the charges preferred against him.

From the irritated expression upon the face of the judge, and the low murmurs of the crowd around, it was plain that this question had been asked more than once, without an answer being vouchsafed.

The severe flogging he had received had only served to render the brain-afflicted giant still more fixed in his resolve not to speak.

"Not guilty, your Honor!" cried a clear, ringing voice, and Lee Ovelman elbowed his way through the startled crowd, entering the circle.

"And who the d—l are you?" snorted the judge, with a most contra-judicial emphasis.

"Counsel for the prisoner at the bar, your Honor."

The judge appeared amazed at this cool audacity, while the angry murmurs of the crowd swelled into audible expressions of dissatisfaction and even threats. But the young lawyer never flinched as he confronted the turbulent crowd, a slightly sneering smile upon his lip.

"What are you afraid of?" he cried aloud. "If the accused is really guilty, nothing I may say or do can change that guilt. Surely you have no wish to hang an innocent man? And yet that is the charge which will be brought against you by the community at large, in case you persist in refusing to allow the prisoner the benefit of counsel."

"The critter as hinted sech a thing wouldn't live long enough to say it twice," shortly uttered the judge, who was plainly struck by the lawyer's words, however. "Tain't so much that we object to your speakin' fer the pris'n'r, but we ain't a-goin' to stan' no p'izen lawyer tricks. Ef you try 'em, why, you'll git fired out o' this yere court by the toe of a bull-hide boot—you hear me!"

"I ask no more than a fair and impartial trial for my client," laughed Ovelman. "If he be fairly proven guilty, I shall be the last to beg for his life."

"You, Josh Howe!" cried the judge, leaning back against the trunk of the tree, and biting off a huge section of plug tobacco; "step out yere an' tell the judge an' jury all you know 'bout this business."

A slender, trim-built, middle-aged man emerged from the circle of Regulators and entered the cleared space around which stood or sat the judge, jury, prisoner, his guards and his counsel.

His language was that of an uneducated man, but one of more than ordinary shrewdness, which was fully borne out by his thin, keen-looking face. He spoke fluently, but direct and to the point, never retracing his steps unless when questioned, and then making the same statement, in almost precisely the same words. In short, one of those witnesses that are more than a match for any ordinary lawyer, that can rarely be caught tripping, and even then adroitly recover themselves before much harm is done.

Such was the case upon the present occasion. In the course of his statement, the witness was frequently interrupted by questions from the prisoner's counsel. At first both the judge and the spectators were inclined to grow restive at such an, as they deemed it, unnecessary waste of time, but as it became more and more evident that, instead of breaking down the evidence for the prosecution, these questions were only serving to strengthen the case against the prisoner, they were well content to wait and listen.

Indeed, the young lawyer was peculiarly unfortunate in his questions, as will be made evident hereafter, and with each failure, he appeared to grow more irritated, which naturally obscured rather than helped to clear his judgment.

Omitting the questions and necessary restatements in answer to them, the evidence of this witness ran as follows:

He, the witness, and two friends, Fred Ackley and Tom Horr, were out hunting along the borders of the Big Black river swamp, but without very good luck. On the morning of the second day out, they met the man who was afterward murdered, on horseback, riding toward the old ford. Had stopped and conversed a while together. Yes, (in answer to a question) had known Mr. Dawson ever since his first arrival at the village, nearly a week before; had been introduced to him.

Mr. Dawson asked them if they had seen anything of Stephen Craythorne in or about the swamp, which question was answered in the negative. He appeared very much put out about not being able to find the man, and said he believed the fellow was hiding from him on purpose. After a few more words, he rode on, and witness saw no more of him until late that afternoon.

About noon they struck the trail of a bear, followed it up and after a long search, found and wounded it. The bear struck into the swamp, and they followed after, but finally lost it altogether. Got lost in trying to find their way out of the labyrinth, and finally blundered into an unusually boggy place, from which they only escaped alive by abandoning their rifles, to lessen their weight. No, (in answer to another question) they had no other firearms. Pistols are not of much service in bear-hunting where the ground is swampy, and only add to one's weight.

They finally managed to work their way to the river, the sight of which gave them a tolerably accurate idea of their whereabouts. A fresh man might have made his way out of the swamp by dark, but as they were so wearied with their toil, they resolved to encamp where they were for the night, and make a fresh start in the morning.

They were lying in the shade upon the low bank of the river, when Fred Ackley called their attention to something swimming across the river, only a few hundred yards above them. At first they believed it was a bear, but before long they recognized it as the head of a man, and as he turned over to swim upon his back, they saw it was Zenas Dawson.

Naturally enough their curiosity was aroused, and they watched him closely, wondering where he had left his horse, and why he was crossing in that manner, instead of going up to the fording place.

In answer to another question from the counsel for the accused, witness stated that the murdered man must have entered the water some three hundred yards above them, and upon the same side. That, though the current was not swift, the swimmer did not appear to try to cross directly over, but rather swam diagonally down stream, as though intending to land upon a log that projected some distance into the water.

Apparently he was troubled by the driftwood which had caught upon this log, for after pausing a moment, he swam to where he could strike bottom just above the drift. This he did when some twenty feet from the bank, and he had waded full half that distance, and was in water not quite up to his waist, when a rifle shot came from the bushes above, and he fell forward upon his face, like one who has been shot dead in an instant. A man sprung down the bank and dragged the body to shore. Yes, we plainly recognized the prisoner, Stephen Craythorne—

Galusha Evergreen, who had been growing more and more nervous at the bungling management of the case by the lawyer he had engaged, could contain himself no longer, but interrupted the witness, crying:

"Fa'r play, gentlemen! That p'izen lawyer is doin' his best to hang the pris'ner, while per-tendin' to help him. Give a man a fa'r show—"

The young lawyer wheeled sharply around, and, as he recognized the speaker and realized the charge that was made, he thrust one hand into his bosom.

But Galusha Evergreen was ready to back up his words, and instantly the muzzle of a cocked revolver stared Lee Ovelman full in the face, while he cried, sternly:

"Pull out your hand, or I'll bore ye through!"

CHAPTER IX.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY.

HOWEVER startling such a procedure might have been in the generality of courts, to the present convocation it appeared to promise an agreeable episode, rather than otherwise. A small portion of the assembly quickly changed their positions, because they chanced to be in a line with the antagonists, and preferred giving the expected bullets a free and unobstructed passage, rather than stop them with their own bodies.

The jury faced round to enjoy the sport, and the judge only changed his position sufficiently to allow him to draw a revolver, which he cocked and rested across his knee.

There was nothing approaching to vulgar haste in the action of either principals or spectators, which served to render the affair all the more interesting, since some purely artistic work might reasonably be expected after such a commencement.

Galusha Evergreen seemed to feel that he was bearding a foeman well worthy his steel, while the young lawyer looked steadily into the muzzle that bore full upon his brain without the quivering of a nerve. At that moment he looked like one who would rather die than show the white feather.

But almost a groan burst from the lips of the disappointed onlookers as his hand was withdrawn from his bosom, holding, not the expected weapon, but a perfumed white handkerchief!

"Business before pleasure, gentlemen," uttered the young lawyer, casting a leisurely glance around upon the clouded faces, while his thin lip curled with a sneering smile. "There is one life already hanging in the balance. Let that be decided, and then, Mr. Evergreen," turning abruptly toward that worthy, "I will cheerfully settle with you."

"To you, your Honor, and gentlemen of the jury, I wish to say a few words in explanation of this bit of by-play. I am a lawyer, but when I left my office in the city for a holiday, I also left the tricks of my trade behind me. My connection with this case would have ended with the scene back yonder, when I bespoke a fair and impartial trial for the accused, but Mr. Evergreen came to me and begged me to defend the prisoner—was so ardent in his behalf that he bade me name my own terms. I named an unusually high price, to which he agreed without a murmur. Just *why* he was so anxious the prisoner should be cleared, I can only surmise, as he did not condescend to inform me. Perhaps, if placed upon the stand, he may kindly explain.

"In accepting his offer I did so with one fixed end in view: to bring forth the whole truth of the matter. If the prisoner was innocent, to clear him; if guilty of the crime, to bring him to the punishment he so richly deserved.

"For this reason my questions have been, not those of a lawyer who was seeking to make black appear white in the endeavor to clear his client, right or wrong, but of a man who was resolved to bring forth *the truth*, and nothing but the truth.

"This much I have deemed it necessary to say in self-defense, and will only add that I hope Mr. Evergreen can show as good cause for his conduct."

A keen judge of human nature, Lee Ovelman stopped here, knowing that he had said just enough to clear himself and to place his antagonist on the defensive. Though he had not directly alluded to it, his words had brought to mind the fact of the wide-spread confederacy, one sworn principle of which was to defend the lives and liberty of such of the members as were endangered. And the black, suspicious looks which were turned upon Galusha Evergreen told plainly that the hint was promptly applied, in the quarter Ovelman intended it should be.

A cooler-brained, quicker-witted man than Mr. Evergreen might well have been confused by this subtle attack, taking such a totally unexpected shape, and the man who would have stood an exchange of shots without a trace of fear, lost his presence of mind and turning, strove to clear the crowd; but in vain.

Those around him drew shoulder to shoulder and barred his passage. No threats were spoken, or hand laid upon his person, but from the black, menacing frowns upon the faces around him, the man knew that any attempt to force his way through that living barrier would be worse than folly. So, with an assumed indifference, and a forced smile on his lips, Galusha Evergreen once more faced the court.

This unexpected interlude coming to an end, for the present, at least, the witness, Josh Howe, was directed to proceed with his statement.

Not only himself, but his two companions as well, recognized the assassin as Stephen Craythorne, and would have had no difficulty in doing so had the distance intervening been twice as great. His great height, long white hair and peculiar garb, could not possibly be mistaken.

Saw him drag the body to shore, then stoop over it, apparently searching the dead man's pockets. At that distance could not positively swear that he took anything from the person of the murdered man, but was strongly of the opinion that he did.

About five minutes after the shot was fired, the prisoner pushed the body of the murdered man out into the water as far as he could, then scaled the bank and disappeared from view amidst the bushes and trees.

"In all this time you made no sound, but sat quietly watching the murderer at his work? Really, Mr. Howe, I do not know which to admire the most; the coolness with which you sat and watched the different phases of what appears to have been a most dastardly assassination, without once raising your voice either to warn the unsuspecting victim, or to frighten away the murderer—"

"The man was killed stone dead," interposed the witness. "That was plain enough from the way in which he fell over. The shot came from ambush, and Mr. Dawson was past hearing an alarm before the sound of the burning powder came across the river to our ears."

"But you might have prevented the robbery which followed, even if too late to have saved the man. Why did you not do so?"

"Because we were not quite fools. There was a river between us. We had no boat, and only one of the three could swim half that distance, even with his own life at stake. Our rifles were buried in the swamp. We had knives, and, had we been upon the other side of the river, might have tackled the fellow, but as it was, had we made any outcry, the murderer would have had plenty of time to cover up his tracks, or else have taken to the swamps and making his way to the big river, have escaped us altogether.

"We knew that he could do the dead man no further injury, and so waited to make sure of the murderer."

Resuming the thread of his evidence, the wit-

ness stated that as soon as they could do so without fear of alarming their game, they left the spot from whence they had witnessed the tragedy, and making all haste to a point where they could ford the river, pressed on to the village, where they told their story. A party was formed and led to the scene of the murder, only a few rods below where stood an old camp put up and occasionally used by Stephen Craythorne.

Footprints which were recognized as having been made by the prisoner, were found leading down and up the steep bank of the river. Close beside the water was found a pool of blood, and a mark as of where a human body had been dragged partially out of the water.

Search was made for the corpse, but in vain. It had evidently been carried down the river by the sluggish current.

With this the witness appeared to consider his evidence all given in, but during a brief cross-examination, the young lawyer asked a question, the answer to which was particularly unfortunate for his client, since it established a strong motive for the assassination.

"When you met Mr. Dawson in the swamp, prior to the alleged murder, did he give any reason for his anxiety to find the prisoner?"

"He did not—at that time," slowly.

"What are we to understand by that? Did he do so at *any* time? Remember, we are striving to get at the *truth*, either to clear or convict the prisoner. Do you know *why* he was hunting for Stephen Craythorne?"

"I do. I said that I had an introduction to Mr. Dawson at the tavern, and that was the fact, but it was not our first meeting; in fact we came up the river together from Orleans. Finding that I was acquainted with most of the people in this neighborhood, he questioned me about a man calling himself Stephen Craythorne, and finally told me that he had the papers to arrest that man for a crime committed some years ago; that this was the only business he had in the Big Black country."

Now, as before, no questioning could shake the testimony of the witness, and he was finally told he might step down.

His two comrades were called, but there was nothing new elicited from them. Others were called to confirm the evidence relating to the search for the body, etc., but Ovelman questioned them but briefly. It was plain that even he was convinced of the guilt of his client, and was too good a judge of human nature to believe he could change the opinion of the jury by empty argument against such positive evidence. With a few well-chosen words, ending with an appeal for as lenient a judgment as possible, he resumed his hat and fell back into the crowd.

The judge was even more brief in his charge to the jury, and the latter, without even arising from their seat or pausing for consultation, delivered their verdict of guilty.

A fierce cry arose from the crowd—the appalling cry for blood!—but the judge sprung to his feet with a drawn revolver and sternly commanded silence.

"That's only one jedger in this yere court, an' ontel I give in my say-so, you fellers want to hold your hush, or somebody'll git hurt—mark that."

"You pris'ner, the jury hes brung you in guilty of murderin' a innocent man. You've hed a fa'r trial—nobody cain't deny that in the hearin' of this court, onless at the resk of eatin' his own teeth. It's bin plainly proved that you hid in the bresh an' shot down a human critter jist as though he was a wild hog or a nallygator. A man that'd do that ain't fit to live, an' so I sentence you to be hung up by the neck ontel you're so dead that Gabril's trumpet couldn't make an eye-winker tremble—so help you God and Andy Jackson!"

Exhausted by this peroration, the judge leaned back against his tree for a moment, then added:

"Ef you got anythin' to say ag'inst the jedgment, now's your time to spit it out. Boys, I don't reckon we could find any better then the big limb that runs out over my head. You kin be fixin' fer the ceremony while the old man is makin' his speech. It'll be a savin' o' time."

But the crowd were disappointed in their expectation of listening to a "dying speech and confession." Now, as all along, the old man kept a close guard over his tongue, and even the preparations about him for his death, failed to shake his resolution.

There was little delay. A noose was flung over the horizontal limb, and as the doomed man was led forward, the noose was carefully fitted around his neck, while a dozen men grasped the other end of the rope, ready to walk away with it at the fatal signal.

Once more the prisoner was bidden to speak, but with the same result. He did not struggle, or make the slightest effort to escape. He seemed more like a man in a dream, rather than one conscious of standing upon the brink of eternity.

A brief pause—then the judge raised his hand. Slowly Stephen Craythorne was drawn from his feet—but scarcely had he cleared the ground than a rifle exploded—the stout rope parted, and the body fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW WITNESS.

AN instant after the sharp report of the rifle, a tall, active figure crossed the intervening space and stood astride the fallen man, stern defiance written upon every feature, and ringing forth in his impetuous tones.

"This man is my friend, and not a cowardly hound of you all shall put tooth or claw into his carcass while I draw the breath of life! Keep your distance, or, by the Great Eternal! I'll shoot—and shoot to kill!"

With a revolver in each hand, ready for instant use, the bold intruder hurled this defiance at the heads of the astonished Regulators—one man braving a hundred!

The rapidity of this occurrence, together with its coming so unexpectedly, had thrown the Regulators into confusion, and gave them the appearance of being cowed by one desperate man.

The rope had been stretched to its utmost tension by the great weight of Stephen Craythorne, added to the immense force necessarily applied to the other end in order to elevate the doomed man without the aid of pulleys or other appliances for lessening the friction. It was at this rope that the rifle shot had been aimed, and the bullet sped true to the will of the bold marksman, partially severing one of the strands. Thus weakened, the rope broke, letting the partially strangled man drop to the ground while those who had been acting as executioners of the sentence pronounced by Judge Lynch, fell in a heap where legs, arms and astounded curses largely predominated.

But there were men in that crowd whom an earthquake could have cowed for only a minute or two, and who would not long quail from before any one man. There were ugly words and threats to be heard, while weapons began to make their appearance in a manner that meant serious business.

Still the intruder did not flinch, though he must have known that the first blow from either side would have raised a storm that could end only in his own death, not to mention that of the one whom he was endeavoring to protect. He had already chosen his first mark, when the rough and ready fellow who had officiated as judge, interposed.

"Man to man is fair play, boys—leave me to manly him. As for you, Joe Freeman," he added, addressing the young man, who was indeed none other than Alabama Joe, "'pears to me you mought be in better business—an' safer, too. This yer man hes ben found guilty o' murder—"

"The man that says that, lies—hold hard, mate! I've got the drop on you, and before you could pull trigger, I'd throw you cold in your tracks. Who brought the charge against him?"

"Don't matter who," doggedly muttered the ex-judge, not quailing before the leveled pistol, but knowing that his life was held in the fingertips of Alabama Joe. "He hed a fair trial an' was bring in guilty. I sentenced him to be hung, an' hung he shall be, by—!"

"Not if he is innocent, old man—I know you better than that," said the young man, with a short laugh. "Come—let's talk it over in a friendly manner, and if the old man is really guilty of murder, I'll agree to fit the noose around his neck with my own hands. Is it a bargain?"

"Not while you keep me kivered. You may lead me, but you can't drive me."

Alabama Joe lowered the hammers of his pistols and returned the weapons to his belt. Then he stooped and lifted the prisoner to his feet.

Stephen Craythorne, owing to his having been elevated so gradually, had suffered but little, and at no time had lost his consciousness, but the same strange apathy that had come upon him at the first blow of the rod, was still upon him. He moved as those around him directed, and now stood quietly beside the tree to which Alabama Joe led him.

With a few pointed questions Alabama Joe learned all that had passed, and then electrified the crowd by demanding to be sworn.

"I don't say that thar hain't been no murder done, jedge," he added, falling into the free and easy manner of speaking which was most natural to the rough-raised settlers. "But I do say that you're all yelpin' on the wrong trail, this time. The old man didn't shoot Mr. Dawson, no more than me or you did."

"But three respectable witnesses have sworn that they saw him commit the deed," interposed Lee Ovelman.

"It's their word ag'inst mine, then, an' we'll see which story hangs together best," quietly replied Alabama Joe, reiterating his demand to be sworn as a witness for the defense.

Much greater violations of legal etiquette than this have occurred in a backwoods court, and there were no objections raised.

This point settled, Alabama Joe clearly and tersely narrated the events with which the reader has already been made acquainted; the meeting with and rescue of the alleged murdered man in the swamp; the upsetting of the canoe in the bayou, and the swimming of the

river; the shot which so startled him, and the sight of a man dragging a body from the water—a body which he instantly recognized as that of Zenas Dawson.

Thus far the story had coincided perfectly with that told by the three witnesses for the prosecution, and the eagerly listening crowd began to believe that they were not to be cheated out of the exhibition which had been so often and strangely delayed, after being so long anticipated and waited for.

"The fust thing I thought o' doin'," continued the witness, "was to holler and skeer off the feller, but then I knowed that'd be a fool trick. Mr. Dawson was dead a'ready, or 't any rate, past helpin' himself; that was clear from the way the other man handled him. 'Twouldn't do him no good, then, an' would only show the murderer somebody was lookin' on."

"The next thing was to run back for my rifle, which I knowed was good as sartin death at more than that range, an' ef the powder in it hedn't bin wet, I reckon thar'd a'bin another dead man on that river bank. As it was, I bu'sted two caps on the old iron, but it wouldn't speak out, an' quick as I could I set to work drawin' out the lead, knowin' thar must be enough dry powder left in my horn to make cold meat o' the p'izen critter across the drink."

"'Tain't so easy gittin' out a ball that's bin well driv' home in a buckskin patch, an' afore I could start the lead, two more men come down the bank out o' the bresh, an' all three on 'em stooped over the body."

"Was either of those three men whom you say you saw, the prisoner, Stephen Craythorne?"

The question came from Lee Ovelman, and was uttered in a tone that appeared to nettles the witness, who eyed him keenly for a moment before replying, which he did, Yankee-like, by propounding another question.

"Be you playin' lawyer for or ag'inst the prisoner—which?"

"Neither the one nor the other, but solely in the interest of justice," was the prompt response. "I stood up in the defense of the accused, when he had no other friend, and if he is innocent, no man would go further to protect him than myself. But let that pass. I asked you a simple question. If you are so positive of the prisoner's innocence, why are you afraid to give me an answer?"

"I ain't afraid to answer any question you or any lawyer kin ax; what I wanted to know was whar you got the right to ax 'em, an' who you was axin' 'em fer. But it don't matter much. I say, then, that Stephen Craythorne, the prisoner, was not ary one of them three men."

"Can you tell us just where the murder occurred?"

"No man better. Mr. Dawson was shot on the left side of the river, lookin' down'ards, an' not more than one hundred yards below the mouth of Alligator Bayou, but on the other side the river."

"If I am correctly informed, that bayou empties into the river nearly two miles below the spot where the other witnesses swore to seeing the prisoner murder a man whom they believed was Mr. Dawson. From your account, the two affairs must have occurred at about the same hour; that is, between four and five o'clock in the afternoon. Am I right, Mr. Freeman?"

Alabama Joe nodded, with a puzzled expression. He could not divine what the young lawyer was driving at.

"You swear that you saw Mr. Dawson shot opposite Alligator Bayou at that hour?"

"I hearn the shot, but didn't see it. I saw the man pullin' the body out o' the water at about that time o' day," said the witness, cautiously.

"Thank you; I should have worded the question differently, though it does not matter much. You swear that the prisoner was not one of the three men who murdered Mr. Dawson, and being upon oath, of course you would not say so, unless it was a fact. But can you swear that the prisoner did not murder some other man, whose close resemblance to Mr. Dawson naturally enough misled the other witnesses into believing it was that gentleman, at about the same hour, only some two miles further up the river?"

"Hold hard, my friend," interposed the judge, "the charge brought ag'inst the prisoner was fer murderin' Zenas Dawson. He cain't be tried fer murderin' the same man, or two different men, in two places at the same time—not while I run this yer court. Ef he didn't kill this man Dawson, then the jury must swallow thar old vardict an' bring him in not guilty."

"But unquestionably there has been a murder—if not two murders—committed—"

"Find out who was killed an' who killed 'em, then fetch 'em along fer trial; but jest now we're lookin' fer the one as killed Dawson."

"Jest one word, an' then I'll go on with my story," said Alabama Joe, as the young lawyer bowed to the cool decision of the judge. "Boys, mebbe you'll jest keep a eye out that nobody don't try to sneak away from the crowd. I want 'em all to hear what I've got to say."

This significant hint was not lost upon the

crowd, who began to realize that there was a prospect of more fun in store.

Alabama Joe quietly resumed his narrative, and was no longer required to break off to answer questions.

Knowing that, even with his rifle in shooting order, he could not kill all three of the assassins to avenge the death of his friend, he lay low and closely watched their motions. He saw them examine the body, then wade with it through the water until they could fasten it to a snag around which had collected a small quantity of driftwood. This they did, leaving the upper portion of the body above water, but not tying it fast in any manner. Evidently their intention was that the body should be found as though it had drifted thither and lodged of its own accord.

This accomplished the three men carefully obliterated all traces of the crime from the shore, then scaled the bank and started up the river.

The witness, fearing discovery in case he used his canoe, swam across the bayou, ran down the river bank for some little distance, then swam over to the other shore, did not pause at the scene of the crime for fear of losing his game, but pressed steadily ahead, resolved to know who the criminals were, soon caught sight of them, and immediately recognized them, one and all.

"In the sight of heaven!" cried Alabama Joe, his voice ringing out clear and distinct as a trumpet call, "I swear that the three men who shot and robbed Zenas Dawson were Josh Howe, Fred Ackley and Tom Horri!"

"Look out there! take them dead or alive!"

Taking advantage of the relaxed vigilance of the crowd, the three men thus denounced had edged away as far as they dared, and when their names were thundered forth by Alabama Joe, they made a bold and desperate dash for safety.

But the avenger of blood followed swiftly at their heels!

CHAPTER XI.

THE WEB IS BROKEN.

ONLY men driven to the very verge of desperation would have made this attempt, where success was almost impossible and failure ruin beyond redemption. And yet there was method in their madness.

They knew that their treacherous web was thoroughly shattered—that the noose they had so fearfully perjured themselves to weave was far more likely to encircle their own throats than that of their intended victim. The thirst for blood which they had so assiduously fostered in their rough and ready dupes, would not be appeased with less. They must either escape or die.

There was one hope. If they could fairly clear the crowd and gain start sufficient to allow them to release each a horse from the number hitched only a few rods away, they might hold their own until the confines of the swamp were reached. Once within those gloomy recesses, and their lives would be comparatively safe.

But in this hope they were doomed to disappointment, thanks to the quick eye and ready warning of Alabama Joe. There was no time to mount a horse, even had it been loose. The closest pursuers were not a dozen yards from their heels, and though light of foot they could not hope to outrun a pistol-bullet. Still, they ran doggedly on until several horsemen swept by them and then wheeled in their front, sternly bidding them surrender or die. Sullenly and without a word they yielded, and were forced back in triumph to the silvan court.

Brief though the chase had been, it had stirred the blood of the Regulators up to boiling heat, and only for the prompt interference of the judge, Alabama Joe and one or two other stout spirits, the self-convicted assassins would have pulled hemp without further ceremony.

"Tany rate, let me give in the rest o' my testimony, boys," urged Alabama Joe.

This the mob granted, feeling sure of their vengeance whenever they chose to execute it.

The witness spoke sharply and to the point.

His first thought was to dog the three criminals until he could procure their arrest, but he soon saw that there was no necessity for him to run so much risk in his present unarmed state. He heard them talk over the trap they were so cunningly laying; saw them pause at the camp recently occupied by Stephen Craythorne; saw them empty a bottle of blood near the water's edge, and one of their number lay down while another dragged him through the soft mud, thus making those telltale impressions and signs that told so hardly against the old man.

The witness paused at this point, and Lee Ovelman caught at the chance to make a brief but sharp and telling speech, adding:

"What we want is pure and simple justice. There has been a murder done; that no one denies. Four men have solemnly sworn that they were eye-witnesses of the murder; three of them accuse Stephen Craythorne, and are accused in turn by the fourth. There is only one question for the jury to decide, and that is: shall the

oath of one man outweigh that of three, equally as trustworthy?"

"Put it two ag'inst three, boss," coolly uttered Alabama Joe. "I don't know who you be, ner why you're so p'izen anxious fer the old gentleman yender, to pull hemp, but ef you'd held your hosses jist a wee bit longer, you mought'a spared your breath, an' not showed your grudge ag'in' him quite so strong. Two ag'inst three—an' the one as kin back up the words I speak in 'cusin' them three dirty scoundrels, is none other than Mr. Zenas Dawson hisself!"

Alabama Joe paused a few moments to enjoy the effect of his disclosure, which was as startling as it was unexpected, then resumed:

"When I found out jist what them three p'izen critters was workin' fer, I knowed I wouldn't hev no trouble in findin' 'em when they was wanted, an' stole away, meanin' to git my boat an' rifle, then strike out fer this place; but as I come down to whar the man was shot, I was jist in time to see him crawl ashore. Though hard hit, he wasn't dead by a long shot, an' we soon fixed it up to ketch the dirty rascals in thar own trap.

"I helped him float down-stream fer a good bit, so our tracks in the soft mud wouldn't tell no tales, then left him while I crossed over after my traps.

"This didn't take long, an' after lookin' to his hurt, which the bullet hed struck him fairly enough over the heart, then glanced on a rib an' come out on his side, I putt him in the canoe an' tuck him down to the bayou that runs up on this side past Crazy John's cabin.

"Long the way he told me that the fust he knowed after bein' shot, was, when a man tuck some papers out o' his breast pocket. He said he tried to holler out, but couldn't—'peared like he was in a nightmare sleep; an' that saved his life, fer at the fust word or sign the p'izen imps would 'a' sartintly finished up thar work. He felt this as soon as he hearn them speakin', an' from that time on he played 'possum.

"He told me who they was without my mentionin' any names, an' said he could sw'ar to 'em in any court o' justice.

"I got him up as fur as the old cabin which Crazy John left ahind him when he hung hisself, but thar he gi'n clean out, he'd lost so much blood, an' I didn't dar' leave him alone by hisself, which is the reason why I didn't git here to tell my story afore."

The cry for blood arose almost before the witness ceased, and for a short time it seemed as though the three perjured criminals would be given a short shrift indeed, but once more the young lawyer interposed.

In a brief but thrilling and eloquent speech he reminded the excited Regulators that only a few minutes before they were about to hang an innocent man, the evidence against whom appeared to the full as conclusive as that against these men. Even now they might possibly be in error. Wait until the wounded man could be brought before the court, and if he could fully identify his assailants, then would be ample time to punish them. Until then, let them be put in the log jail, with a trusty man on guard at the door.

Alabama Joe, who had been freeing Stephen Craythorne from his bonds, and putting his own coat over the bruised shoulders of the old man, now added his voice to that of the lawyer, and their efforts were eventually successful. The three men were securely bound and stowed away in the stout log cabin, and a trusty man placed on guard before the door.

This was done under the immediate supervision of Alabama Joe and the settler who had officiated as Judge Lynch, but the moment he was satisfied that all was secure, the former bethought himself of his old friend, Stephen Craythorne. No one appeared to know where the old man had gone, the general interest having been transferred to the real criminals, but presently Alabama Joe caught sight of his friend, together with Honor, his daughter, passing through the village, evidently bound for their home in the wilderness.

He hastened to intercept them, but knew the old man too well to do more than clasp his hand with an honest fervor.

"Hope ye don't b'ar no grudge, neighbor, seein' we was only strivin' to do our duty; shake!"

As he spoke, the rough-and-ready judge came up and extended his hand, but the giant turned upon him with a fierce, growling sound, and dashed his clenched fist in the man's face with fearful force. Had not the fellow possessed an uncommonly hard and thick skull, it would have been shattered by that terrible blow. As it was, he was lifted from his feet and turned end over end, lying where he fell, a dozen feet away, without life or motion.

"Tell them to keep away," grated the giant, his eyes glowing like those of a maddened wild beast. "They flogged me like a hound—like dogs they shall die, if ever they cross my path!"

Grasping Honor by the arm, he strode away, not even Alabama Joe daring to follow him in his present mood.

Subject to periodical attacks that were nearly

akin to insanity, the hard usage he had received, together with the ignominy of being flogged, appeared to have fairly unsettled his mind.

With a tact learned by long experience, Honor said not a word, though forced along at a pace almost beyond her shaken powers to maintain. At such times she knew that it was best to leave him to himself; that speaking to him would be almost certain to drive him away to the swamps from which he had so recently returned.

So, not a word had passed between them when the lone cabin was reached, and still in silence Honor removed the coat which kind-hearted Alabama Joe had hung over the sadly-bruised shoulders, then tenderly bathed and anointed the hurts, bandaging them as well as she was able.

In sitting down, Stephen Craythorne had placed his chair close to the open door, and his wild gaze was constantly roving over the prospect, lighted up by the last gleams of the setting sun.

Suddenly his gaze became fixed upon a particular portion of the undergrowth, and thrusting Honor aside, he grasped his heavy ax and strode toward the bushes, a dangerous light in his eyes. But before he could reach the point toward which his suspicions were directed, a man arose, crying:

"Hold hard, stranger; I'm a friend, come to warn you of great danger, at the risk of my own life!"

Whether it was that he believed these words, or was influenced by the touch of his daughter's hand, for Honor had followed swiftly after, the uplifted weapon was lowered, and the giant motioned for the man to precede him to the house.

Galusha Evergreen—for he it was—obeyed the signal without any hesitation, though he walked high and gingerly, much as a nervous man might with a grinning bull-dog smelling at his heels. It was plain that he felt he was in danger, but the interest he felt in Stephen Craythorne, the nature of which can only be surmised at present, was so great as to overshadow his fears.

Placing a chair for him at the fireside, Craythorne turned to the carcass of the deer, which lay just as he dropped it before his arrest, and dragging it to the door-step, began removing the hide, not in one piece, but in long strips.

"I come as a friend," began Galusha, with a nervous glance from the giant to his child, then back again. "I come as a friend, though a stranger, because I hate to see an honest man abused—may be killed."

"What is it—tell me—surely there is no more danger—" faltered Honor, clasping her hands.

"I'm sorry to say there is danger—great danger," slowly and impressively added the man. "Many of the settlers are not satisfied. I heard them talking of lynching—of hanging your father. Not altogether because of the assault upon Mr. Dawson, but there were hints of some dark crime committed years ago, back in the States. Some were for arresting him and returning him for trial, but they were talked down, and it was agreed to come here, after dark, and taking him unawares, hang him out of hand."

The maiden sunk to the floor with a low moan. The giant glanced up with a strange light in his eyes, but then resumed his work. Galusha Evergreen shifted nervously in his chair, and looked as though he wished himself well out of the trap into which he had thrust his head.

"I didn't dare try to learn too much, for they hadn't forgotten how I stood up for you when that devil of a lawyer was trying his best to criminate you, but I heard enough to convince me that your life is in danger if you linger here."

Again he paused, but a low sob from the lips of the maiden was all the answer. The giant was now testing the rawhide strips which he had cut, by pulling stoutly upon them.

"You can take to your boat, yonder, and by pulling all night, place yourself beyond their reach by morning," added Evergreen, his voice growing more and more unsteady. "I will guide you to a place of safety—not only because I feel a strong friendship for you, but my own life will not be safe in these parts when the fact of my warning you shall have become known. We can travel together until we strike the Mississippi, and then taking passage on the first boat—"

He ceased abruptly as the giant arose and stepped toward him. Springing to his feet, he essayed to draw a revolver, but the action was frustrated by the resistless grasp which Stephen Craythorne fastened upon him, and the next instant he was raised bodily high above the giant's head, when Honor clasped her parent's knees, crying:

"Mercy—spare him, father—do not kill him!"

CHAPTER XII.

DANDY RECEIVES A SNUBBING.

RUTH LIVINGSTONE'S voice was sharp and peremptory as it cut Dandy the Dwarf short in his valorous vaporings, and probably prevented the doughty little manikin from getting a broken

head at the hands of the young lawyer, for he was too true a knight not to promptly obey the first call of the fair lady to whom he owed allegiance.

Even Dandy's sublime assurance was not proof against the storm that awaited his coming.

Ruth's nerves had been not a little shaken by the startling events of that day, and what, in her usual careless, happy disposition, might once have been passed over as the idle nonsense of a privileged character, now appeared to her in a very different light. She began to realize her imprudence in admitting the dwarf to such familiarities, and to doubt whether she would be able to end the nonsensical alliance quite as easily as she had taught herself to believe.

Dandy received her sharply uttered reproof in silence, though there was a puzzled expression in his great eyes, and a nervous twitching of the muscles around his lips that pleaded stronger for him than words could have done. They proclaimed his utter ignorance of having done any wrong, and for the first time the roguish maiden seemed to realize the fact that, however unlike the generality of mankind in most things, Dandy the Dwarf at least possessed a heart and the power of loving, if no more.

If this discovery—for such it actually was, since, until now, Ruth had regarded the dwarf more as an animated toy provided for her amusement, than as a sentient being—curbed the fair girl's tongue, and rendered her reproof less cutting than it might otherwise have been, it also set her to thinking seriously, and led her to form a decision that was destined to bring in its train a series of remarkable events.

Dandy listened in silence, and for an hour or more the snubbing he received appeared weighing upon him like a nightmare-dream. He hung around the room in which Ruth sat beside her still unconscious father, like an affectionate dog that has been causelessly punished, a wistful, puzzled look in his eyes that haunted Ruth, despite her anxiety concerning her father and the sheriff.

Shortly after this, the landlord recovered his senses, and insisted upon knowing all that had occurred since he was stricken down. In order to keep the old gentleman quiet, Ruth sent Dandy out in quest of information, bidding him bring with him the one doctor which the place afforded, if that were possible.

In a brief space of time Dandy returned, but alone. The doctor was one of the jury, and he had been refused access to him, Stephen Craythorne then being on trial for his life.

Randolph Livingstone strove to arise, vowing that he would defend the prisoner with his own life, but his bruises were far more severe than he had believed, and he was unable to arise against the gentle force exercised by Ruth and her grotesque aid. The brief struggle as exhausted his feeble strength, that he shortly after fell into a doze that lasted for hours.

In claiming his assistance, Dandy seemed satisfied that Ruth had forgiven him, and as he was not conscious of having done anything wrong, he quickly became his usual self. After so long harping on one string, it was not to be expected that he would or could long refrain from recurring to it, even after the reproof he had received.

"Do you know what I have been thinking about, little girl," he said, after a brief silence; then adding, without waiting for an answer: "The old gentleman will be laid up for a month or two, and will need some one to look after the business. Now he will have to make way in time, anyhow, and this accident gives him a good excuse—don't you think so?"

"I don't understand you," said Ruth, shortly; but she did, only too well.

"Why, we can get married at once—"

"Stop, Dandy," interposed Ruth, her face paling as she resolved to end the question for once and all. "If you are jesting, your wit is offensive and in very bad taste. If you are speaking soberly, then the sooner you understand the extent of your folly, the better for us both."

Dandy made no reply, but stood staring at her in open-mouthed amazement.

"The jest was silly enough at first, but constant harping upon it has made it fairly disgusting. Oblige me, then, by never so much as hinting at it again, in my presence, at least."

"But we *are* to be married—surely you cannot deny that?" stammered the manikin.

"I can and do deny it—no one but an arrant fool could ever have thought of such an impossible thing in sober earnest."

A complete and almost startling change came over the dwarf at these sharply-spoken words. He shrunk and cowered beneath them, trembling in every nerve, his face bearing the expression of one whose dearest hopes have received their death-blow, and there was a choking tremor in his really musical voice as he spoke:

"I would rather you struck me with a rod of fire, than to speak to me in that hard, strange tone. What have I done to deserve it? I have served you like a dog—I have worshipped the very ground you trod upon—I have given you the whole love of my heart and soul. If I have

ever given you cause of offense, it was unwittingly, and I beg your forgiveness here upon my knees. Only say that you did not mean—that you will recall those hard, cruel words.”

As he spoke, the dwarf sunk upon his knees before the maiden, gazing appealingly up into her face, his goggle eyes moistened, his flabby lips quivering with strong emotion.

To an uninterested observer, the sight would have been a ludicrous one; the kneeling figure being so grotesquely hideous. But to Ruth it was painfully solemn. Not until now did she fully realize the great wrong she had done in her light-hearted thoughtlessness. Until now, Dandy had been to her much as a soulless toy, gifted with speech and motion, but without any other senses in common with herself. She had never looked upon him as a man, possessing the feelings and passions of a man, and hence had allowed him many privileges which she would never have dreamed of granting one of his sex in whom, by the severest exercise of her imagination, she could have foreseen a possible suitor.

Her conscience smote her bitterly now, but she had the good sense to perceive that to falter now would be cruelty instead of mercy.

“I have wronged you deeply, Dandy, but it has been through thoughtlessness, not maliciously. I never dreamed that you were in earnest—I looked upon you as a friend, as a brother. We can still remain friends, if you can promise me to never more speak of this thing.”

“I don’t understand—my brain is in a fog,” muttered the dwarf, arising and passing one hand over his eyes, as though trying to brush away a blinding mist. “I only know that I love you—and that I believed you loved me. But I will wait—you have had so much trouble—to-morrow—”

Ruth saw that she must speak still plainer, or that the painful scene would have to be enacted over again at some future time, and though she felt it one of the most difficult actions of her life, she arose and checking Dandy led him across the room to where a small mirror reflected their two faces, side by side.

No words of explanation were needed as Dandy looked upon the strongly contrasted picture with unjaundiced eyes. For the first time in his life, probably, he saw himself as others saw him.

His features became even more grotesquely distorted as a low, gasping sob broke from his lips, and turning he crept out of the house like some sorely wounded beast, unheeding the voice of the maiden as she regretfully sought to console him.

Ruth was still pondering over the truly painful affair, when a swift, springy footfall upon the veranda caused the bright blood to hotly suffuse her cheeks, and her eyes to sparkle through the tears that had dimmed them. Her heart was too full and sore for her to disguise her feelings with her customary coquettish veil, and when Alabama Joe entered the room, she arose with outstretched hands.

In granting an inch, considerably more than an ell was taken, for the audacious lover clasped Ruth to his broad breast, pressing kiss after kiss upon her blushing face, nor did he desist until an indignant exclamation startled them both, followed the next instant by a pillow, flung by the sound arm of Randolph Livingstone, who, exhausted by the exertion, lay glowering at the young couple, the picture of offended pride and amazement.

But Alabama Joe was not one easily abashed, and still holding Ruth by his side, he said:

“Grant us your blessing, father-in-law—”

“I’d grant you a sound wiping-down with a hickory towel, you rascal! if I could only lift my head. Leave my house, Joseph Freeman—”

“But you can’t git up, daddy,” drawled Joe, who took an exquisite delight in shocking the aristocratic landlord, by assuming an uncouth dialect. “You’re flat o’ your back, an’ we two’re goin’ to make hay while the sun shines—ain’t we, Ruth?”

The maiden made no reply, but took advantage of the entrance of the doctor to slip away and out of the room, where Alabama Joe followed her, as soon as his aid was no longer necessary in setting the landlord’s broken arm.

Ruth received him with unusual coldness, when he sought her out, but Alabama Joe would not yield the advantage he had gained, and taking possession of her hands, gently forced her to take a seat upon the old fashioned lounge beside him.

“My dear girl,” and his voice was strangely soft and sweet as he spoke; “let there be no more wearing of masks between us two. I love you—I could say no more if I were to plead until midnight. I love you—I want you to be mine only—I want you for my wife—my darling wife.”

Ruth strove to arise but he held her fast. She was frightened by the intense earnestness with which he spoke, and trembled in every limb.

“Tell me, darling—just one word—”

The door behind them was abruptly flung open, and with a harsh, painful cry, Dandy the Dwarf entered the room, a drawn revolver in his hand. His great goggle-eyes were glowing

like those of an enraged wild beast; his face was hideously distorted, as he confronted the lovers.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GRATEFUL INTERLUDE.

FOR one fleeting breath the lovers confronted that ominous intruder upon their privacy in silent, motionless amazement, but then a low, startled cry burst from the maiden’s lips as she sprung into prompt and decisive action.

She saw the cocked revolver in the dwarf’s hand and this, together with his glowing eyes and agitated countenance, led her to believe that Dandy was bent upon the death of Alabama Joe.

With a quick, gliding spring, she paused close before the dwarf, and grasped the deadly weapon with a strength that she never knew before, calling back to Alabama Joe, over her shoulder:

“Go—he will shoot you—save yourself!”

Few men were ever more thoroughly puzzled than was our hero at this strange scene. He had never coupled the idea of danger with the dwarf, and was taken completely by surprise, not only by the action but the words spoken by Ruth as well.

Instead of acting in accordance with her hasty warning, he strode forward and promptly disarmed the manikin. This was an easy matter, for Dandy made no resistance. Indeed he appeared conscious only of the presence of Ruth, even when the firm grasp of Alabama Joe was fastened upon his arms.

“Tell me what this all means, Ruth,” ejaculated Freeman, a little impatiently. “If this hop o’ my thumb has frightened you, I’ll take him across my knee—”

“No—leave me alone with him for a moment,” was the hurried reply. “I will explain everything to you—only go, please!”

Though reluctantly and by no means satisfied, Alabama Joe could not refuse obedience to this urgently expressed wish, and turning upon his heel, taking the dwarf’s pistols and knife with him, he left the room, but took up his position on the veranda, within easy call.

“Dandy, are you determined to make me not only hate, but despise you? Am I to believe that all this time I have been making an intimate friend of a murderer?”

“If I were what you think me, would you be wholly without blame?” bitterly retorted the dwarf. “Have you not led me on, and fooled me to the top of my bent, only that you might have a merry subject for jest—you and that overgrown brute, Alabama Joe? Truly, it was royal sport, befitting a lady and gentleman!”

“Dandy, you cannot really believe that?”

“It would be far easier to believe than what you have already taught me—but enough. I thought there was no more of bitterness in life left for me to experience, when you drove me from your presence, but unluckily for me, I was a witness of your meeting with that man, and the thought of his seeming good fortune drove me nearly mad. I could not go away without one more word with you—and when I heard your voices in here—when I heard him begging you to become his wife—something that I could not resist made me enter, resolved to—”

“Murder him, who had never injured you!”

“No—I may be mad, but not so mad as that,” and the hard, forced tone in which the dwarf had been speaking, changed to a low, sad cadence. “I only wished to ask you one question—to bid you choose between him and me—and then die as I had lived, loving you with all the fervor of a soul that is not quite so hideous as the casket that contains it. But now there is no need of asking your decision. When you saw the weapon that was intended only for myself, your only thought was of him—you interposed your own body to shield his from harm—you love him.”

Though Dandy paused here, Ruth made no reply. She was too strongly affected by the hopeless despair which was expressed even more in his tones than voice.

“I meant to kill myself at your feet, hoping thus to imbitter your cup of bliss, but that madness is past now. I will say good-by, and, while wishing you all imaginable happiness, will earnestly pray that we may never meet again in this life.”

As he uttered these words, the dwarf bowed his head and pressed a brief kiss upon Ruth’s hand, then, unheeding her faint cry, sprung through the low window onto the veranda, and, without pausing to secure his weapons, descended the blood-stained steps and quickly disappeared in the gathering twilight.

Scarcely had Dandy made his exit from the window, than Alabama Joe entered by way of the door, but he found Ruth in tears and far from being in a fit mood for resuming the broken thread of their sentimental interview. But Alabama Joe was too impetuous a lover to be daunted by an April shower, and was proceeding to comfort the distressed maiden after a very agreeable—to him, at least—fashion, when the fates, in the guise of the grim old doctor,

again interposed and summoned Ruth to the bedside of her father.

Bearing his disappointment with what philosophy he could muster, Alabama Joe accompanied the doctor to the room where Dandy and Lee Ovelman had deposited the sorely wounded sheriff.

“There is nothing that I can do in this case,” said the doctor, who, only for his love of liquor, might have made no mean mark in the world of medicine, after a brief examination of the wound. “Whoever fired that shot owns a steady hand and a true eye. The bullet must have passed directly through the poor fellow’s heart, and now lies imbedded in the muscles of his back. That he has lived thus long is one of the miracles of nature, but his death is only a question of time.”

“Who was it shot him?” asked Alabama Joe.

“You can’t prove it by me,” replied the doctor, with a shrug of his shoulders. “Nobody appears to know who fired the shot.”

“I’d give a good deal to find out. A whiter man than Jim Carby never trod the footstool.”

One of the servants belonging to the hotel was placed on duty beside the couch of the dying man, and then Alabama Joe left the house in company with the doctor, who had still other patients to attend to, the fruits of that afternoon’s work.

Fortunately for Alabama Joe’s peace of mind, the doctor was well enough acquainted with the country not to require a guide to the cabin of Crazy John, where Zenas Dawson was lying, and, as soon as his more pressing duties were over with, the worthy disciple of Esculapius was dispatched on horseback to the aid of the wounded man, bearing balm for the outer, and sustenance for the inner man. Alabama Joe promised to come with some means of conveying Dawson to the village early on the following morning.

The fatigue and want of sleep which he pleaded as excuse of this delay, were not feigned, but it may readily be believed that a hope of another and more satisfactory interview with Ruth Livingstone was a still more powerful inducement.

This hope was fully gratified. Ruth had done some serious thinking since her father fell into a sound sleep, thanks to the potions administered by Doctor Brady. She now fully realized the great wrong she had unconsciously done Dandy the Dwarf, and as a natural consequence formed sundry good resolutions, among which was the abjuring all future coquettishness, and hence Alabama Joe found it an easier matter to read her real sentiments toward him than would have been the case a few hours earlier.

Having first satisfied himself that the old gentleman was really asleep, Alabama Joe noiselessly entered the room, bent on resuming the siege. It may be that Ruth read this determination in his ardent eyes, and feeling the weakness of her own defenses, preferred to surrender under the light of the stars, rather than the full glow of the lamp; but be that as it may, she arose with a warning finger upon her red lips, and passed out upon the veranda.

Enough has already been said to show that Alabama Joe was by no means a bashful lover, and knowing that another interruption might come at any moment, he did not allow the fair enemy time to collect her scattered forces, but pressed on to a glorious victory with resistless valor.

Let those who “have been there,” imagine the burning words that were whispered into the ear of the fair one; let them picture to themselves the ardent pleading—the timid subterfuge—the coy yielding—the swelling joy that filled the heart of the victor almost to suffocation, as his ear caught the dearest, sweetest, most precious word that lovely and loving lips can utter; but don’t let them ask a crusty pen like mine to render a sublime scene ridiculous by attempting to place it upon paper.

Let the curtain fall over the first half-hour after the lovers stepped upon the veranda.

At the end of that time their mutual transports had somewhat subsided, and were kept tolerably well under control, though some of the laughing stars might have told tales out of school, had they been so inclined.

Ruth told her lover all that had transpired between herself and Dandy, blaming herself severely for the wrong she had unconsciously done him, and this offered Alabama Joe a fair excuse for comforting the penitent, which he did in a truly lover-like manner. And so successful was he in his laudable efforts that Ruth was greatly consoled, and began to feel that she had not been so much to blame, after all.

Thus the time passed in delightful intercourse, the lovers blissfully ignorant of a startling truth: that jealous, vindictive eyes were even then watching their every motion, while at each interlude of billing and cooing, the muzzle of a cocked revolver was brought to bear upon the tall form of Alabama Joe, with a forefinger itching yet fearing to pull the trigger until a more favorable opportunity.

The lovers were slowly walking to and fro upon the long veranda, his arm around her waist, her head resting lightly over his heart, reveling in the pure bliss of love’s young dream,

when a sudden change came over Alabama Joe, and he paid far more attention to a gradually growing light in the northern sky, than he did to the words his fair companion was uttering.

Ruth was quick to notice this, and with the true egotism of a young lover, was equally as quick to take offense at this too sudden cooling of love's ardor. Raising her head and striving to free her waist, she said something about returning to her father's bedside—just what, Alabama Joe never knew, for his growing suspicion had become almost a certainty.

That red light was produced by a conflagration of some sort—of a log cabin he now felt sure.

"Old Craythorne's house is burning," he exclaimed, in strong excitement. "It must have been set afire—and by those cowardly hounds that would have murdered him in cold blood but for me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

STARTLING EVENTS.

THOUGH Alabama Joe's character for gallantry may suffer in the estimation of the fairer portion of my readers, it is an undeniable fact that the moment he realized his old friend was in trouble, he leaped over the railing of the veranda to the ground, without a parting word or apology to his fair companion, raising the alarm in a voice that rung clearly from one extremity of the village to the other.

If his suspicions were correct, it soon became evident that only a small proportion of the villagers were concerned in the outrage, for the number of men that followed his impetuous lead, grew greater with every moment, until nearly a hundred heavily tramping feet awoke the echoes of the night as their owners ran toward the blood-red beacon, four miles away.

But Alabama Joe waited for none of them. Twice or thrice he shouted aloud his belief—that there was a foul tragedy being enacted at the lone cabin, and bidding all honest men follow him to the rescue—but the words were uttered without breaking his swift stride. He never once gave a thought to the danger he himself might be incurring; he only thought of the old man who had already been subjected to so much pain and ignominy, without having done ought to deserve the brutal treatment—of him, and of gentle Honor, whom he loved as he might have loved his own sister had she lived.

Alabama Joe crossed the intervening four miles without once breaking his stride or pausing for breath, reaching the flaming goal far ahead of his nearest competitor. He crashed through the line of bushes and drew his pistols as he sprung into the clearing which surrounded the log cabin. But the foemen he looked for were not to be seen.

The roof of the little cabin had fallen in just before Alabama Joe reached the spot. The weather-beaten and thoroughly seasoned logs of which the walls were composed, were wrapped in flames and all aglow; but being more than a foot in thickness they were standing still firm and unshaken. The heavy door was crackling, and almost burnt through in places, while a heavy piece of timber was still pinned across it, as though the occupants had been *barred inside!*

This much Alabama Joe took in at a glance, and a cursing groan burst from his lips, while the cold perspiration started out in great drops upon his forehead, as, even above the fumes of the burning wood, he detected the sickening stench of roasting flesh!

He believed that the enemy had done their work only too well—that the cabin had been fired to destroy the telltale evidence of their crime, or—and the strong man trembled like a terror-stricken child at the horrible thought—it might be that Stephen Craythorne and Honor had been taken by surprise, been barred inside, to perish amid the pitiless flames!

If so, reason told him that the end had come long before, and he staggered like a drunken man as he approached the blazing pile.

What mad purpose was in his brain, he himself could scarcely have told, as he drew so near the flames that his clothes began to smoke and shrivel, but whatever it was, it was forgotten, as a choking, gasping cry for help came to his ears.

At first the strange sound appeared to come from out the burning building, but as Alabama Joe started in amazement, the cry was repeated, followed immediately after by a crackling in the adjacent bushes, and then the dull fall as of a human body. This combination of sounds guided Alabama Joe, and he darted to the spot just as the foremost of the settlers burst through the bushes, panting and thoroughly blown.

He found a body lying beneath the broken limbs of a thorn-bush in, or rather upon which he had evidently been lying. Not of his own free will. That was made clear when Alabama Joe bore the body out into the broad glare of the blazing cabin, for stout thongs were upon both feet and arms, while a rude gag hung around his neck, still wet, having apparently just been ejected from his jaws.

The fellow had been partially stunned by his

fall, alighting as he did upon his head, and for a few moments could make no articulate reply to the impetuous questions showered upon him by Alabama Joe.

Some of those now collecting, remembered the man as Galusha Evergreen, who had played a rather queer part in the events of that day, and this fact by no means decreased the interest they felt in the strange story which he now told.

He glossed over that portion of the facts which has already been laid before the reader in a prior chapter, and his audience were too eager and excited to be very critical, but the truth of the statement ran as follows.

Honor's earnest pleading probably saved the life of the intruder, for the madman—for that such Stephen Craythorne then was, there can be no reasonable doubt—lowered the helpless captive to the floor, and put the rawhide thongs to the use for which they had originally been intended, binding Galusha Evergreen hand and foot, beyond the possibility of voluntarily moving a muscle. A gag was then inserted between his jaws and fastened behind his neck, after which he was carried out of doors and unceremoniously tossed into the top of a thorn bush. From this elevation, Mr. Evergreen was enabled to view the further movements of the gigantic madman.

It was his hand that fired the building and the most of its contents, only reserving a couple of blankets, a small bundle of Honor's clothing, and a quarter of the deer, the remainder of which probably emitted the stench which so startled and unmanned Alabama Joe. The rest, the furniture and all, was given to the flames, but not until darkness had fairly settled over the earth.

The fire was kindled inside the building, and was so long in breaking through the roof and door that the helpless witness began to believe the flames had expired.

Having barred the door, Stephen Craythorne, leading his sobbing daughter by the hand, passed out of sight in the direction of the creek. From the sounds that came to the listener's ears, he believed they had entered a boat and passed down-stream.

Ever since, he had been essaying to free his jaws of the choking gag, but without success until he saw Alabama Joe, after which the thorny bed upon which he had been so uneasily lying, gave way beneath his weight, and led to his discovery.

Galusha Evergreen was closely questioned, but soon made it evident that he was telling no more than the truth.

"Tain't so bad as I feared," said Alabama Joe, thoughtfully rubbing his chin, "but it's plenty bad enough. Atween you, you fellers hev driv' the old man clean crazy-mad. Seein' 'tain't the fust time he's hed them kind o' fits, 'twon't matter so much to him, this takin' to the swamps, but when I think o' poor Honor, I feel like lickin' thunder out o' every durned fool that hed anythin' to do with this dirty business! An' I'd do it, too, only the chances air that the wust on ye—them as whipped the old man—will git wuss pay then a lickin'. Ef some o' you don't chaw lead afore the new moon is old, then I'll eat my hat!"

There was no need of more explicit speech on his part. The guilty ones only too readily divined his meaning, and more than one nervous glance was cast over shoulder, while those who had most cause for fear, drew closer together as they wended their way homeward.

Galusha Evergreen bore Alabama Joe company back to the Washington Arms, but there was scant converse between them. Neither was inclined for speech, though their reasons for taciturnity were widely dissimilar.

Alabama Joe found Ruth still watching by her father's bedside, and blissfully unconscious of having given cause for offense, he noiselessly drew a chair beside her, and stealing his arm around her waist, told her of the strange actions and disappearance of Stephen Craythorne and Honor.

Then, after sundry ceremonies which need not be more than hinted at here, he bade Ruth good-night, and started for his room, intending to make up for the sleep he had lost. But in this agreeable hope he was most disagreeably disappointed. His work for that night was not yet done.

A sudden outcry from outside arrested his attention, and as he listened, he caught a few words that brought a sounding oath to his lips and sent him hurrying out into the night.

The purport of those words was that the prisoners—Josh Howe, Fred Ackley and Tom Horr, the three perjured witnesses who had attempted to fix upon the head of Stephen Craythorne the dastardly crime they themselves had committed—had either broken bonds, or been rescued by friends from the outside.

The excitement was so great that it was some little time before Alabama Joe could get at the facts of the case; which were as follows:

Two of the men who had followed Alabama Joe to the scene of the fire, before returning to their respective homes, concluded to go by the way of the jail, for the purpose of telling their friend, the guard, what had transpired. In the dark-

ness, they stumbled over a prostrate form, lying close beside a fence some little distance from the jail, and on investigation the supposed drunken man proved to be the guard, gagged with a corn-cob in a handkerchief, and bound hand and foot, but otherwise uninjured.

Of course they lost no time in setting him free, but without stopping to enlighten their curiosity, he arose and ran to the jail. But his birds were flown, and it was his angry cries that so startled Alabama Joe.

The account he gave was brief, and to the point.

As he heard the cry of fire raised by Alabama Joe, he advanced a few paces from the door over which he was standing guard, to see where the fire was. He had not been standing thus for more than a minute, when some one flung a coat or blanket over his head, from behind, and then he was tripped up, choked speechless, recovering his senses, only to find himself bound and gagged.

He was lifted up by two men and carried over to the fence near which he was afterward found, where he was dropped, with a stern warning that the faintest attempt at outcry on his part would most certainly result in his having his throat cut.

When left alone he had vainly striven to slip his bonds or the gag, in order to raise the alarm.

While listening to this hurried explanation, a fresh cause of alarm occurred to Alabama Joe.

He remembered stating in his evidence that he had left Zenas Dawson alone in Crazy John's cabin. What if the escaped criminals should remember those words, and resolve to finish their bloody work, thus disposing of a dangerous witness against themselves?

CHAPTER XV.

A FIERY BAPTISM.

ALABAMA JOE had told the true story of the swamp tragedy, although, as yet, only one man living knew all of the causes which led to the attempted murder and the false swearing which followed after. It was true as strange that Zenas Dawson had that day twice escaped with life when death seemed inevitable; once, thanks to the ready hand and cool wit of Alabama Joe, and once through his own iron nerve and power of dissimulation. And now, as the afternoon waned, the wounded lawyer lay upon a pile of dry leaves and moss in the cabin which had served as a home for poor old Crazy John until the bitter fire in his brain drove the old man to a suicide's grave. His thoughts were busy, and with Stephen Craythorne, who was even then being tried by the stern court of Judge Lynch for the willful murder of one who was far from being dead. But of this, Dawson was wholly ignorant, else, instead of lying idly here, he would have made all haste to the rescue, though he had to crawl the whole six miles upon his hands and knees.

The reasons why Alabama Joe left Dawson here, so far from any human being, have already been hinted at. The bayou at this point made an abrupt bend, and any further use of the canoe would have carried the *voyageurs* away from, rather than to their destination. Dawson was too faint from the loss of blood to think of covering those half-dozen miles upon his own feet. It was all-important that the papers stolen from him by his would-be assassins should be recovered, and they themselves secured before they could have a hint of the miscarriage of their bloody plans.

Hence it was that Alabama Joe left Zenas Dawson in the lonely cabin beside the gloomy bayou, where we now find him.

For hours he had been sleeping heavily, dreamlessly, but the time thus spent was not wasted. When he awoke, though still weak and with an uncertain, doubtful feeling in his limbs when he first essayed to stand erect, he found himself much stronger than he had expected.

His first thought was to quench his thirst and appease the hungry gnawing at his stomach. This the forethought of Alabama Joe enabled him to do, and then the young lawyer set about putting his pistols in serviceable order.

This was no slight task, as he had been in the water long enough to thoroughly saturate the powder in each cylinder, and he was forced to slowly dig out each of the dozen bullets, with the small blade of his pen-knife. But he had time and to spare, and any occupation was better than idly brooding over the past.

He had been robbed only of his money and the pocket-book containing his papers, but while lying as one dead, he had heard enough to explain this. The criminals were working for more than petty spoil, and left him enough to show that the deed was not committed for the sake of plunder alone.

Breaking open a small powder flask which he carried in his breast pocket, Dawson broke up the caked powder and placed it to thoroughly dry before a small fire, while cleaning his pistols, and before the sun sunk to rest, his work was done, both revolvers being loaded and in working condition.

Feeling in a measure proof against the incursion of any enemies, either two or four footed,

the young lawyer placed a few more sticks upon the fire, then sat down upon his mossy couch, and gave himself over to deep and earnest thought as he gazed into the merrily dancing flames. More than one pleasing picture he saw there, but none fairer than that of a sweet young face, out of which the large blue eyes looked at him with a haunting sorrow in their luminous depths.

The face was that of Honor Craythorne, who was even then bitterly sobbing as she was led away from her burning home by her crazed father, going she knew not whither.

But Zenas Dawson knew nothing of this. His thoughts were, for the most part, pleasing ones, that lasted until long after his head drooped and peaceful slumber stole over him.

When he awoke, it was suddenly, and with his every sense upon the full alert. He felt instinctively that something strange or terrible was about to happen, though from whence, or in what shape, he could not have even guessed.

Partially arising upon one elbow, he listened with bated breath; but naught save the usual night sounds of the dismal swamps came to his ears.

The far-away routing of a bull-alligator; the croaking of countless frogs, from the shrillest treble to the deepest bass of the huge, bloated patriarch; the occasional splash as a heavy terrapin slid from some log into the stagnant water; the weird cry of the screech-owl; the mournful plaint of the whip-poor-will; the chirp of the busy cricket; the drowsy hum of the beetle; all these, together with a thousand other sounds not so easily explained, came to the ears of the listening man, but none of them accounted for the almost superstitious premonition of coming evil that held the young lawyer spellbound.

Something told him that his life was in danger—that a greater peril than he had ever yet encountered, was before him—yet he was unable to move a limb after that first convulsive start. He could only listen, his soul in his ears.

How long the interval, he could not have told, but at length Zenas Dawson caught the sounds of human voices in cautious consultation without the cabin. Preternaturally acute though his sense of hearing was at that moment, he was unable to distinguish more than a few words; but he heard enough to know that his life was in danger—that those who had sought his death before, were come now to make sure of their work.

They were disputing as to which one should enter the cabin and strike the finishing blow, but the matter was quickly decided.

Now that he knew what manner of danger threatened, Dawson quickly cast aside the superstitious fancies that had fettered him, and smothering the sound amid his clothes, he full-cocked one of his revolvers, then crept toward the outward swinging door with the intention of closing it.

But this he was fated not to accomplish.

Himself unseen, he saw a dark, crouching shape stealing silently toward the open passage-way: the shape of a man, whose right hand clutched a knife, the long, bared blade of which shone like a silver flame in the light of the twinkling stars.

Never cooler in his life, though he knew that only the death of these men could prevent his own, the young lawyer raised his weapon and covered the stealing shadow. He could not distinguish the sights upon his pistol, and so held his fire until the assassin was almost within arm's-length of the open door. Then the weapon exploded, and with a horrible, choking groan, the wretch fell backward, writhing in the agonies of death, half of his skull shot away!

Expecting with each moment to receive one or more bullets in return for his shot, Dawson grasped the door and drew it toward him, letting the heavy oaken latch fall into place. But the anticipated rush did not take place. Not a sound came from the enemy without. Either they were desirous of concealing their proximity, or they had been cowed by the sudden and totally unlooked-for fate of their comrade.

Crouching beside the closed door, Dawson listened with painful intentness, knowing that he could expect no mercy if he fell once more into the hands of the dead rogue's friends. And as he listened his eyes roved uneasily around him.

He saw by the faint, uncertain light of the dying embers that by means of the door alone could any person effect an entrance into the little log cabin.

Instead of the usual "stick and daub" chimney, a few lengths of rusty stove-pipe led from the queer "dutch oven" looking fireplace up through the roof. There was only the one doorway, and no windows. Either the door must be broken down, or a hole cut through the roof.

Thus far Dawson's reflections ran, then he heard a faint noise at the opposite side of the building—saw a bit of the moss and clay chinking fall out from one of the spaces between the logs—and acting upon the impulse of the moment, he threw up his pistol and sent a bullet through the new-made opening.

A sharp cry, followed by a fierce, bitter curse, told him that his lead had not been entirely wasted, but he did not pause to exult over this

second triumph, if such it may be called. Faint though the fire was, it still gave out light enough to guide a bullet home to his heart through a chink in the wall. With a strength lent by the emergency, he crossed over and scattering the embers, quickly trod them out, leaving all in darkness so intense that it could almost be felt.

The exertions he had made already began to tell upon his enfeebled frame, and, no longer able to stand erect, Dawson crouched near the center of the room, ready for what might follow.

Nor was he left long in suspense.

An indistinct noise was heard without, then came a quick, heavy trampling, followed almost immediately by a sharp shock against the closed door.

Dawson smiled derisively in the darkness at the idea of their forcing the door. Opening outward, it was now closed against heavy jambs, and could only be forced from without by being literally demolished. Still, he dragged himself a little forward, and held his pistol in readiness.

But that one abrupt shock was all. Apparently the enemy were satisfied that no entrance could be effected in that manner. Still they had not abandoned the spot, for Dawson could hear them now upon one side of the cabin, now upon the other, stumbling to and fro through the brush piles and second growth of the clearing, as though they were seeking for something which was not easily found.

The dull, drowsy weakness that was stealing over his senses, rendered his perceptive faculties less acute than usual, but finally and all at once he realized the terrible peril that threatened him. The strange movements of the enemy were now only too clearly explained, as a dull crackling sound came to his ears, accompanied by a warm, pungent smell and a rapidly growing light, sifting through the numerous small crevices in the rough log walls.

He saw that the cabin was surrounded by a cordon of blazing brush—that he was about to be roasted in his refuge, like a wolf in its lair. That, or to be shot down by an unseen enemy as he rushed out into the night.

Few men would have hesitated between the two, nor was the young lawyer an exception.

Though his limbs were weak and trembled beneath him, he arose and reached the door that was already growing hot beneath the fierce breath of the flames, and lifting the stout latch, essayed to fling wide the barrier—essayd but in vain!

With an impatient, wondering cry, he dashed his shoulder against the door, but the barrier did not even shake or quiver. With trembling hands he sought for some forgotten fastening, but without success. There was but the one wooden latch, and that was swinging free!

He knew then the real purport of that one sharp shock. Instead of trying to break down the door, his enemies had fastened him in, to die like a rat in its hole!

For a short space of time he was no better than a madman. Almost any death but this he could have faced with a clear eye and unblanched cheek. But now, with wild, furious cries, he flung himself against the hot barrier, beating it with his fists, kicking and tearing at the rough slabs in the vain endeavor to burst it open, only desisting when his fictitious strength was utterly exhausted.

Bruised and bleeding he sunk to the ground, with the taunting laughter of his fiendish foes ringing in his ears.

The room was filling with smoke, hot and stifling. Forked tongues of fire were darting through the walls as though reaching out for the helpless victim they were eager to devour.

Already the little building was one mass of fire. The sun-dried logs were easily ignited, and blazed up as only pitch-pine can blaze.

Once more the taunting laughter arises from without, and, as though stung by its echoes into renewed life, the wounded man staggers to his feet and glares around him with bloodshot eyes.

He sees and catches at the one hope that remains for him; unless he can scale the wall and burst his way through the roof, that crackles beneath the intense heat, showing seams of fire here and there, he must die a death of horrible torture amidst the pitiless flames.

If only he had not wasted so much precious strength upon the barricaded door! But there is no time to waste in idle repinings. He must work, and work swiftly, or die the death!

Weak and staggering, he essays the feat, clinging with hands and feet to the scorching-hot walls, working his way upward, slowly and painfully, knowing that failure meant certain death.

Easy as the feat would have been under other circumstances, it proved an impossible one now.

When almost within arm's length of the roof, the young lawyer felt his powers failing him. His limbs were like leaden weights, dragging him down and keeping him from grasping the one frail hope of safety. Strange sounds and unearthly voices were ringing in his ears. The heated air around him seemed filled with horrible forms and faces, all mocking at his helplessness and gibing at his despair, taunting him with the dread fate that awaited, while their

hands of searing flames were flashing before his face, intent upon beating him down—down to die the death!

In vain he strove to reach the roof—and in his madness he cursed the visionary phantoms that hovered around and above him—cursed and raved at them as only a madman can.

A forked tongue of fire shot through the wall and struck against his face. He thought it the threatening hand of one of the fiery phantoms, and strove to knock it aside; but as he raised his hand, his other limb failed him, and he fell to the ground.

A veritable madman now, he sprang erect, and drawing his second pistol, fired shot after shot at the floating, mocking faces, yelling and raving in the wild frenzy of delirium.

But his bodily powers could not resist this deadly strain upon them for more than a few moments.

Once more he sunk to the floor, and like magic his scattered senses returned to him. He realized the truth, now. Death was at his door and would no longer be denied. Escape from the dread summons was impossible; each breath was like inhaling liquid fire.

Painfully he arose to his knees and with head bowed upon his breast, breathed a short prayer for mercy and forgiveness for his manifold sins.

Then, cocking his revolver, he placed the muzzle against the roof of his mouth and pulled the trigger!

CHAPTER XVI.

PLUCKED FROM THE FLAMES.

LIKE a revelation the danger which threatened his new-found friend from the escaped prisoners, flashed upon the mind of Alabama Joe, and with the promptitude of a man whose life has been passed amid such emergencies, he made known his suspicions to the excited crowd now grouped around the guardian of the jail.

"Tain't only to save a man's life or to punish the dirty whelps as is makin' all this trouble," he added, energetically, "but our honor as law-abidin' citizens is at stake. It's honest men ag'inst the p'izen gang that's so long bin a disgrace to this kentry. We've got to check 'em sometime, an' now's as good a chance as we kin expect. Who's in fer a man-hunt that'll end only when our game's run down, ef it takes from now until Christmas?"

Hot and sharp the words fell from his lips, but the appeal was scarcely needed. If there were any present who entertained a different opinion, they were careful not to make it known for their own sakes.

Turning to Dick Brown, the man who had so unexpectedly been changed from jailer into prisoner, Alabama Joe hurriedly uttered:

"Git Dan Carver an' his dogs an' put them on the trail. Tell him I'll give ten dollars apiece if he picks up the men we want. Off with ye! The rest as calls themselves honest men, foller me!"

There was no need for more words. The rough settlers had been robbed of their prey time and again, each successive disappointment leaving their appetite for blood all the more keenly whetted, and the prospect of a man-hunt in deadly earnest was greeted with wild enthusiasm.

Dick Brown hastened away to the cabin where lived a half-breed Cherokee, Dan Carver by name, who kept several couple of stout hounds, all thoroughly well broken to hunt runaway slaves, and by their rare powers of foot and nose, netting their owner a goodly sum during the year.

Brown had no difficulty in enlisting the low-browed, sinister-looking fellow in the cause. He was only too glad of the chance of trying his dogs on white game to chaffer about terms.

The hounds were taken to the jail and quickly put upon the scent, thanks to the bits of rope that lay where they dropped when cut from the limbs of the three rescued prisoners. Only Brown and Carver followed the animals, which ran free, though regulating their pace by the commands of their master. All others had hastened on before, fired by the appeal of Alabama Joe.

Swift as though fresh from a long period of uninterrupted repose, Alabama Joe started upon his second long and hard race for that night, heading straight for the lone cabin beside the bayou where he had left his friend, wounded and helpless.

A strong premonition of evil was upon him, and feeling that he had rather neglected his duty as a friend, now strained every muscle to make amends, if that were yet possible.

Six miles away as the crow flies, and full two thirds of that distance a tangled, difficult swamp. Not an encouraging prospect, truly; but he knew that the rescued prisoners must have traversed the same stretch before him, in case his fears were not without foundation. And despite the long start they must have secured, he did not entirely despair of foiling their plans.

Gradually the nimble and sure-footed swamp ranger drew away from his comrades in the night-race, all save one. Pace by pace a tall, like form bore him company, running with an

ease and unjarring effort that betokened the practiced pedestrian. This Alabama Joe noticed, even in that period of intense excitement, and unconsciously slackened his pace as he sought to identify the man who was brushing him so closely.

As he did so, the runner dashed past him with a low, mocking laugh, then moderated his pace in turn, exclaiming, as Alabama Joe drew abreast:

"If I knew the road, I'd give you a lead, old man; as it is, I suppose I must be contented with keeping alongside. Pity, too! it's such a fine night for a brisk canter!"

Not a little to his surprise, Alabama Joe recognized in the mocking speaker the young lawyer who had played such a prominent part in the strange events of that day, and a part, too, that was not entirely free from suspicion. He was a little nettled by the patronizing words, but contented himself with replying:

"Ef you kin keep at my heels, you'll do enough to brag about, stranger."

Even as he spoke, the athletic swamp ranger increased his speed by degrees until he was covering the ground at a really dangerous pace, even for one as thoroughly acquainted with the course they were following as he assuredly was, and the brief feeling of pique vanished before genuine admiration, as he found Lee Ovelman keeping beside him, holding his own, without any apparent difficulty.

Thus they raced for two miles or more, wasting no breath in words, but as the ground began to grow more difficult, as they came to where the swamp really began, then the tougher muscles of Alabama Joe proved too much for the city-bred runner, who gradually dropped further to the rear.

The swamp scout would have been either more or less than human, had he not felt a proud thrill of triumph at this result, for it was no mean victory he had gained. But this exultation was of brief duration, and he pressed on with dogged determination, as he remembered the momentarily forgotten object of that killing race.

Few men could have endured such a strain long over that difficult going, and still fewer could have kept their course through the intense darkness of that tangled swamp; the feat would have been no easy one under the broad light of noonday. Yet Alabama Joe never hesitated or seemed at a loss for a single moment.

His anxiety lest he should be too late was growing stronger with the passing of each minute, for there was a barely perceptible light far away before him that he could account for in but one manner.

He feared that the escaped criminals had done their bloody work, and had set fire to the lone cabin in order to destroy all traces and evidence of the dastardly deed. And as the lurid light deepened and grew more distinct, this unspoken fear became a settled conviction. But that did not cause him to relax his desperate exertions. On the contrary, it acted as a spur does upon a jaded but fiery-spirited horse.

He ran on, straining every nerve and muscle—on until the hot blood burst from his nostrils and trickled down over his golden beard, while his big heart thumped so fiercely that it seemed about to burst through his ribs. On until within a short quarter of a mile from the blazing cabin—then he halted abruptly.

The dull, muffled sounds of rapidly succeeding pistol-shots came floating to his ears, accompanied by wild, agonizing screams that sounded more like the notes of a frenzied wild beast than those of a human being.

Only for an instant did he hesitate, then, with a wild hope of still reaching the cabin in time, Alabama Joe tore through the swamp with redoubled speed.

Panting, almost blinded by the boiling blood that throbbled so madly in his temples, he came out into the little clearing that surrounded the burning cabin. As once before on that same night, he saw a blazing building with the one door fastened upon the outside. As then, the place seemed utterly deserted by human life, and all was still within the fiery pile.

Without a moment's hesitation Alabama Joe rushed forward and grasping the heavy timber that was firmly braced against the door, tore it down and flung it aside. As he did so, the unfastened door swung open, and he caught a glimpse of a human body lying near the center of the flame-lit interior. Only for a fleeting breath, then the eddying flames swooped down as though eager to complete their work.

To venture across the threshold seemed like courting death, and even the stout, fearless heart of the swamp ranger might have failed him had he paused long enough to realize the nature of the risk, but this he did not do. Instead, he bowed his head and dove swiftly into the glowing furnace, picked up the body, emerged and ran at full speed toward the bayou, his garments smoldering, his hair and beard in a blaze. Still bearing the body of his friend, he plunged into the stagnant water; then, the flames extinguished, he crawled out of the water and up the bank, sinking down beside the motionless form he had dared so much to save from the flames, and lay like a dead man.

For the first time in his life Alabama Joe had fainted.

Thus they were found when the foremost of the panting settlers came up, and at first they both were believed dead men. But a hasty examination quickly set all fears at rest.

Alabama Joe had escaped with only a few slight burns, his swoon being caused by fatigue and intense excitement; but the young lawyer was in much worse case, though still alive.

It may be mentioned here, what his own lips explained at a later hour: that his attempt at putting an end to his tortures failed simply because he had emptied every chamber of his revolver at those visionary shapes that mocked him, during his temporary delirium. Blinded by the intense heat, he sought in vain for his other pistol. Then, overcome by the smoke, his head sunk forward upon his arms, and he knew no more until he awoke with those rough but friendly forms around him.

He was badly burned in places, but had suffered more from the smoke and heat than the flames. His hair and beard had vanished, but they would grow again, and his face had escaped almost entirely. On the whole, he was not much the worse for wear, and unless his wound should take an unfavorable turn, he might die of old age, for all of that fiery baptism.

Alabama Joe was quite himself again, long before Lee Ovelman reached the spot together with other stragglers, and he was the first one to notice a sickening stench as of burning flesh.

No sooner did he speak of it, than others began to notice the peculiar smell, and no time was lost in investigating the cause. Nor did they have far to search before finding the solution.

A sharp exclamation from the man who first made the discovery, drew the rest around to the side of the cabin nearest the bayou, and a trembling finger directed their awe-struck gaze to where the charred trunk of a human being lay close to the glowing logs.

"Git a pole an' rake it out," huskily muttered Alabama Joe. "I'm afeared it's all that's left o' Doc!"

His words were promptly acted upon, and the ghastly remnant of what had so recently been a living, sentient human being like themselves, was drawn out of the reach of the devouring flames.

Only the feet, legs and lower part of the trunk remained, and when the village shoemaker declared that he recognized the flame-shriveled boots as a pair which he had made for Doctor John Brady, a deep silence fell over the crowd.

They knew that the doctor had had ample time in which to reach the cabin, but where was his horse? How came it that he was outside the building, while Dawson had been fastened within?

The only person who they believed could explain these points, had not yet recovered sufficiently to do so, and they were forced to stifle their curiosity for the time being, though the solution came sooner than any one of their number could have expected.

They were talking of the doctor's many foibles, pleasant and otherwise, and one more reckless fellow produced his whisky flask as the most appropriate monument that could be placed above the remains.

Even as he spoke, a bony hand grasped the flask and a deep, sepulchral voice uttered:

"You always was a malicious devil, Tim Hayes!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN-HUNT.

TIM HAYES shrunk back with a terrified look upon his Celtic face, while the others stared at the gaunt speaker in open-mouthed amazement.

"You always was a malicious devil, Tim Hayes! You're planning to wake me after I'm dead and buried. An empty bottle might hold me down, through sheer disgust at the hollowness of human hopes and joys, but devil a Brady livin' or dead that c'd rist continted in his grave wid the swate smile av the darlin' craythur comin' down t'rough the turf above—an' av a full bottle like this war there, the devil an' all c'dn't kape Doctor John Brady quiet under the daisies. Gentlemen, your very good health!"

Not even the thick coating of swamp mud from crown to sole could longer disguise the speaker, and if any doubt remained it would have been banished by the remarkable celerity with which Tim Hayes's whisky flask was emptied. Only the doctor could have taken more than a pint of the fiery liquor at a single swallow. Who, then, was the dead man?

The village crispin still declared that the boots upon the carcass were of his handiwork, and the discussion grew so warm that a free fight seemed imminent, when fortunately the doctor threw light upon the subject.

He had been examining the headless trunk with a professional curiosity, and to confirm his suspicions, cut away the left boot from the swollen foot with his penknife, thus revealing a deep and peculiar scar just above the ankle.

"It's either Tom Horr or his double, gentle-

men," he said, positively. "I can swear to that scar—but how did he come here? And what does all this mean, anyhow?"

"I'll explain that as you work," said Alabama Joe, once more remembering the young lawyer. "There's a patient, over yonder, that needs your care and skill. Bring him through all right, doctor, and I'll give you a keg of the finest old peach brandy you ever snacked your lips over."

"If you only had a sample of it here now!" and the inveterate toper moistened his pendulous lip with a longing sigh. "I've gone through enough toil and tribulation this night to kill a mule!"

As none of those present appeared to understand the hint, or if they understood, to act upon it, the doctor accompanied Alabama Joe to the spot where Zenas Dawson was lying. After a careful and thorough examination, he gave his opinion as already recorded: that quiet repose and careful nursing would soon put the injured man upon his feet again, sound in mind and limb. Then, while he was salving the burns and replacing the bandages upon the gunshot wound, Alabama Joe briefly explained the strange events that had taken place since the doctor set out for the lone cabin beside the bayou.

The doctor's explanation of his delay in reaching the spot, was of much more interest to himself than it would be to the reader.

He had lost his way in the gloom of the swamp and after wandering at random for what seemed an age, while all the time the traveling appeared to grow worse and worse, he caught sight of the growing light of the burning cabin, almost at the same instant with Alabama Joe. He did not know what the fire was, nor where it would lead him, but anything was better than wandering aimlessly through those disagreeable and really dangerous recesses. Heading his horse straight for the fiery beacon, the doctor rode with a free spur; but not for many rods.

The animal balked, only to be driven on by a free application of the keen spurs—on for a couple of yards; then the treacherous footing gave way, the horse plunged headlong into a deep quagmire, casting its rider far over its head.

After a desperate struggle for dear life, the doctor succeeded in scrambling out of the mire, and though his saddle-bags were beyond his reach, he had a fair supply of medicines and plaster in his pocket-case. Heading for the fire, he reached the spot just in time to overhear the rather peculiar eulogies pronounced over his supposed remains, and to empty the whisky flask of Timothy Hayes—by far the most agreeable part of that night's work, in his own estimation, at least.

Doctor Brady had just finished his story, when the hounds of the half-breed glided into the little clearing, closely followed by Brown and Carver.

There was no time wasted in discussion. The hounds had trailed the escaped prisoners to the cabin, and the body of one of the criminals had been fully identified. Though Zenas Dawson was not yet able to bear testimony, there could be no doubt about the refugees having attempted another no less dastardly crime. It would be a burning disgrace to all honest men, if the survivors were not pursued, arrested and brought to justice.

Alabama Joe was tacitly looked upon as the leader in this matter, and the prompt decision with which he acted, fully justified the wisdom of the choice.

"Doc," he said, after directing the half-breed to make a circuit around the clearing with his dogs, in order to strike off the trail left by the refugees in departing from the place, "you will stay here with Dawson, while Tom Clark will go back to the town after a horse and some blankets, to make a litter. The rest of us will keep on after the runaways. If we don't get back by noon, and you think you can manage it, rig up a litter and take him on to the tavern."

This arrangement appeared perfectly satisfactory to all parties concerned, and as a subdued shout came from the lips of Carver a few moments later, announcing the discovery of a fresh trail, each man grasped a blazing brand and set forward upon the heels of the hounds, who were running mute, in obedience to their master's commands, lest by giving voice the runaways should take the alarm in time to effectually break the scent. Thus the man-hunt was fairly inaugurated.

Once more Alabama Joe found the young lawyer, Lee Ovelman, keeping him close company, nor was he at all sorry that such was the case. The stranger's actions of that day had been rather enigmatical, and the swamp ranger had secretly resolved to know more of the man before they parted company for good. Nor did he lose any time, though the keen-nosed hounds led them at a fair pace through the swampy wood. But Ovelman showed more tact in answering questions than he had in putting them, earlier in the day, and Alabama Joe gained but little satisfaction.

But he learned one thing: that the stranger was keeping a close guard over his tongue, and

that told him there must be a secret to guard. Feeling confident that, sooner or later, he would catch the lawyer off his guard, Alabama Joe contented himself with allaying whatever suspicions his persistent questioning might have awakened in the mind of his companion.

Gifted with a lively imagination as well as a very fluent speech, the swamp ranger kept his tongue going easily, now upon one subject, now upon another, finally settling upon the wild and fantastic legendary lore of the swamp they were then traversing.

For this one-sided conversation, better opportunities were given than may appear upon the surface, since the refugees appeared to have anticipated pursuit, judging from the frequent attempts which they had made to break their trail. They knew of Carver's dogs, beyond a doubt, and probably expected to be followed by them, as soon as their escape should be discovered, but either they were too fearful of losing time, or they underrated the skill of the professional man-hunter, for after each balk, the half-breed saw that the trail had been regained in less time than the fugitives had spent in endeavoring to lose it.

During these periods, all save Carver and his dogs came to a halt, and while waiting, Alabama Joe exercised his tongue to the utmost.

"It's tame enough kind o' fun we're showin' ye, stranger, so fur, but I'm in hopes it'll be better an' more interestin', afore long," he quoth, during one of these pauses. "Ef the trail leads on the way I reckon it will, you'll larn somethin' not teach'd down in the big settlements. It's rather ticklish work crossin' over the bayous from this on. I don't mean alligators, though they do sometimes pinch a man powerful nasty. But thar's the fresh-water shark, as some smart folks call 'em—gar-fish, I say. I've hearn tell o' 'em fifty foot long, with jaws that'd grind up a saw-log easy as you can chew a tooth-pick; but I never see one more'n twenty foot in the cl'ar. That was last month. Was goin' to swim over the bayou, when a 'gator swum by, the gar after it. The 'gator tried to make land, but didn't hev time afore the gar ketch'd it. I settled down, 'spec-tin' to see a tough little skrimmage, but no such thing. The gar backed out into the bayou, raised its head, tossed the 'gator up in the air, ketch'd it eendways as it came down an' swall'ered it without so much as winkin' a eye. When I saw that, I cluded I wasn't in too big a hurry to walk around the bayou."

"How large did you say the alligator was?" asked Ovelman, languidly.

"I didn't say, but I reckon it would 'a' panned out ten feet, an' mebbe a few inches more. But they ain't so skeery when you git used to 'em. Thar was a man I knewed said he never thought o' usin' a canoe. Jest watched his chance an' jumped a-straddle of a big gar whenever he wanted to go anywhar by water. Hed a chain bridle to steer by. But I wouldn't sw'art to its bein' all true. He would lie, sometimes, that man; though he did b'long to the church an' would come down powerful hefty on the groans whenever the preacher give the adversary a knock-down blow 'twixt wind an' water."

"Then thar's the cawana, a sort o' over-grown snappin' turtle, that gits to be the bigness of a flatboat, or more so. You kin find that in this swamp, in the bigger mud-holes, but 'tain't noways likely you'd ever find a second one. I've knowed 'em fished fer with log chains, an' a two-inch thick iron bar made into a hook, but they never was one drawn out yit. The chain'd break, or the bar straighten out, but thar the cawana would lay, its long neck twisted 'round a root, mebbe, or else its head an' tail an' feet stuck in the bottom so fast it couldn't be lifted, no more than a man kin raise hisself by pullin' hard onto his boot-straps."

"I see the thing tried once, down in Louisiana, which mebbe you'd like to hear tell about."

But the story was not related just then.

Carver and his hounds had been busily at work searching for the broken trail, and at this juncture his cry announced the discovery—and something more, for there was a wild, fierce exultation in the yell that sent a thrill through every heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SECRETS OF THE SWAMP.

At that significant yell, one and all of the lounging swamp-rangers sprung into eager action, swinging their smoking torches above their heads until the quickened flames cast a ruddy glare over the shallow bayou beside which they had been resting. The call had come from the further side of the barrier, and knowing that Dan Carver would wait for no man, if his dogs had really hit off the trail, there was no thought of searching for a point where they might cross the lagoon dry-shod, but each man slid down the muddy bank, holding weapons, ammunition and torches over their heads. The mud and water reached to the waist of the tallest man among them, and effecting a crossing was a matter of no little difficulty. Then, too, as they struggled in the tenacious gripe of the swamp-mud, uncomfortable recollections of

the many blood-curdling tales told of the dread cawana, the alligator-gar and kindred monsters, would flash across the minds of the nearly be-bogged men with disagreeable distinctness. But numbers give courage, and the lagoon was crossed without any visible manifestation of fear.

Side by side Alabama Joe and Lee Ovelman leaped into the coffee-colored bath, and were the first ones to reach the side of the half-breed man-hunter.

"See!" he chuckled, as he held up the sleeve of a cotton shirt that shone blood-red and still wet in the glare of the torches, "they hid it in the mud, but old Heart-eater found it. Blood—plenty of it, an' fresh, too! One of them's hurt so bad he can't 'a' gone much funder. We'll run into 'em afore another hour—you hear me talk!"

"If so, hadn't you better muzzle your dogs?" observed Ovelman, gingerly touching the bloody rag.

"An' so git 'em killed, mebbe, afore we could come up—not much!" snapped the man-hunter, then adding, with a sidelong nod toward Alabama Joe: "He kin tell you—I got work to 'tend to."

During this interval, the hounds had been sitting upon their haunches, their eyes fixed upon their master as they uttered an occasional whine of impatience to be off. Their training was a marvel of perfection, and Carver was justly proud of his terrible pets.

As he ceased speaking, a single motion of his hand sent the hounds away upon the fresh trail, running as silently as at first, and keeping just so far in advance of the half-breed.

Though the traveling was by no means easy, Lee Ovelman appeared so anxious to have the speech of the man-hunter explained, that Alabama Joe good-naturedly gratified his wishes.

"This ain't the fust time I've hunted 'long with Dan an' his dogs," quoth the swamp-ranger, "though we never chased white blood before. You know niggers will run away, an' when they take to the swamps, 'tain't much use in chasin' 'em unless you've got good dogs. Now Cherokee Dan's got the thing figgered down to a mighty fine pint, an' what he 'nd his hounds don't know 'bout man-huntin', ain't sca'cely wuth the l'arnin'. You kin see one thing; how he kin make hounds run on a hot scent without givin' tongue. Let anybody else han'le them same dogs, an' the sweet music they'd make would bring an old fox-hunter back to life ag'in ef he'd bin dead a dozen years."

"I can understand his reasons for that," said the young lawyer. "But if the dogs run down their game, they'll tear the poor devils to shreds before any one can interfere. They may be deserving of death, but surely not such a horrible fate as that. I give you all fair warning that I'll shoot the hounds, rather than see a human life sacrificed—"

"Say your prayers afore you pull trigger, then," was the cool interruption. "Cherokee Dan would tickle your heart with his knife afore you could burn powder twice. But you needn't be afeared. Dan gets his livin' by them hounds, which he couldn't do ef they was to cripple the game they ketch'd."

"Ef you're nigh enough, this is what you'll see. Jest as many streaks o' four-legged lightnin' as they is dogs. You'll see 'em grab thar game, an' bear it to the ground, but they won't break through the hide with a single tooth, onless the Injun gives them the word, which he won't do, onless it be to save thar lives."

"The old man's got a mint o' money done up in them four hides, but it wouldn't keep long ef he was to hunt 'em in muzzles like you said. A man that's runnin' for life, like these critters be, will fight as long an' hard as they kin, rather than be tuck. Ef the hounds was muzzled, they couldn't only yelp an' wait fer help, which mebbe wouldn't come in time to save them from bein' made into sausage meat."

"You think, then, that there is no doubt of our overtaking the fugitives?" asked the lawyer.

"Onless a cawana, 'gator or gar-fish ketches 'em fust, we're sartin to do it," was the prompt reply. "Ef we backwoods fellers are powerful slow to start, we're monstrous hard to stop when we do git to goin'. Ef we don't run 'em down afore, we'll stick to the trail ontel next Christmas."

His curiosity apparently satisfied, Lee Ovelman asked no more questions, and even Alabama Joe found the traveling difficult enough to render talking inconvenient.

The hounds were following the freshening trail at a goodly pace, with the half-breed close to their heels, while the remainder of the party were scattered here and there, as shown by the flickering torches they bore, forming a strangely impressive picture of wild-wood life.

Within an hour from the time of finding the bloody rag, there occurred another break in the trail, where it was lost in the edge of a wide and apparently deep lagoon or bayou, which served to partially drain that portion of the swamp. Here Cherokee Dan bade the men keep at a respectful distance from the edge of the water, then sent one of his hounds up and another down the bank, crossing over to the further shore with the other two dogs. By this

division of forces, no time would be unnecessarily wasted.

Lee Ovelman settled down into a comfortable position beside Alabama Joe, offering him a cigar and lighting one himself. After a few leisurely puffs, he reminded the Swamp Ranger of the incident he had been about to relate a few hours earlier.

"Our surroundings will lend a halo of romantic reality to the story," added the lawyer, but whether in earnest or quiet sarcasm, Alabama Joe could not decide. "The lagoon, yonder, looks a fit abiding-place for some such monster as your big turtle."

"That's what gives sech a spice o' fun to this sort o' trampoonin'," laughed the ranger. "A body don't know at what minute he's goin' to git picked up by a cawana or sich-like, while p'izen snakes are thick as fleas in a Mexican's bed. Lucky that we all drink so much corn-juice that we're p'izen-proof—ef a snake does bite us, he gits the jim-jams right off, an' we don't mind it more then as ef 'twas a 'skeeter bite. But I'll tell ye about the cawana,* sence I started to."

"'Twas down on the Red river, some three years ago, that a lot of us young fellers thought we would hev some fun, fishin' on a big scale. We knowed whar one o' the big cawanas used, in a deep hole full o' water, not fur from the house we was stoppin' at. We'd watched the hole many a hour, an' once or twice got fa'r shots at the critter, but 'twas like shootin' at a elephant with a tatur popgun; the bullets never fazed its hide."

"I'm tellin' ye the sober truth, stranger, when I say that the cawana we saw was full ten feet across the back shell, an' more'n a rod long, not countin' the head, neck nor tail. The head was bigger then a bull's, an' the neck was nigh as thick as your waist."

"The plantation blacksmith tuck a two-inch iron bar, an' made a hook out of it. A heavy log-chain was fastened to the hook, an' a two inch cable hitched onto that. A lamb was killed an' tied on fer bait, an' then pitched into the hole. The cable was tied 'round a big tree, an' we waited fer a bite, ontel a heavy rain-storm come up an' driv' us in out o' the wet."

"The next mornin' we saw that the bait hed bin tuck, fer the hawser was stretched like a bar o' iron. The hull gang o' us tuck hold an' pulled like we was workin' fer wages, but not a inch could we gain. 'Twas like a man tryin' to lift hisself by the boot-straps, as I said afore."

"When we found this wouldn't work, we sot to an' rigged up a pa'r o' stout pulleys, passed the free eend o' the hawser through 'em, an' then hitched on a yoke o' heavy cattle. Two buck niggers stood ahind the oxen with black snakes, an' at the word they cut loose. The cattle pulled an' strained, the niggers yelled an' cursed an' whipped, the hawser stretched a foot or so, but that was all. Though the critters tugged ontel they was 'most layin' on thar noses, they couldn't budge the cawana, not a inch. 'Stead o' that, they was slowly pulled backward fer about six feet, then the rope was still an' stiff ag'in."

"Course we wouldn't give it up that-a-way, an' another yoke o' oxen was hitched on ahead o' the fust pa'r. Then come more yellin' an' whippin' an' tuggin'. The dirt flew lively fer a time, but then the four critters begun to gain a few inches at a time, an' we all sent up a yell that mought 'a' bin heard ten miles—but we hollered too soon."

"All at once the cattle tumbled forward in a heap, and the hawser, log-chain an' hook shot over thar heads an' lay its full length on the ground beyond."

"That two-inch iron bar hed straightened out like a ramrod, an' pulled loose without budgin' the cawana a foot! An' on the bars we found some queer lookin' bones an' bits o' gristle; the bones were some on 'em as thick as my wrist."

"You were present at the time?" asked Ovelman, and there was a peculiar significance in his tones that caused the hot blood to suffuse Alabama Joe's face.

"I was; and if necessary, I would take an oath to the truth of the story. I can show you the upper shell of a cawana that measures over ten feet in length, by six in breadth, which I found one day in this very swamp. The skeleton was partially destroyed, or I would have saved it for mountin' as a little known curiosity."

What reply Ovelman might have made to this earnest declaration, will never be known, for a moment later, one of the hounds gave vent to a prolonged musical note, cut short, however, by a wild cry of terror as some heavy object plunged into the turbid waters of the lagoon.

That fearful scream was repeated twice; then

*It may not be amiss to state here, that what has been stated in the text concerning these monsters of the Southern swamps, is quite generally believed by many inhabitants of those regions. The account given by Alabama Joe of the attempted capture of a cawana was related to me by a gentleman who declared that he was present at the time and was willing to take his oath as to the truth of the story. Perhaps the reader can find a reasonable solution to the mystery.

came the sounds of a furious struggle in the water, and above the loud splashing was a human voice calling for help!

CHAPTER XIX.

A REFRACTORY PRISONER.

THESE blood-stirring sounds came from a point a few rods down the bayou, and on the same side with the majority of the man-hunters. There could only be one solution: that the human game which they had hunted so long and persistently, had at last been overtaken—and with eager cries, one and all made the greatest possible haste in that direction.

It so chanced that Alabama Joe and Lee Ovelman were the ones nearest to the scene of the scuffle, and thus were the first ones to reach the spot. They both plunged into the water without a moment's hesitation, guided by the first dim rays of the new-born day.

Through the muddy spray cast upon the air, the outlines of a man and hound were visible, the former desperately striving to hold the powerful animal at arm's-length, but repeatedly foiled by the treacherous mud upon which he stood.

From across the lagoon came a clear, encouraging yell, followed by three quick plunges as Dan the man-hunter and his hounds hastened to perfect the capture. And nearly at the same moment the coming from above, the fourth hound darted past the two men like a hairy arrow, and closed with the vainly struggling wretch.

A grating curse broke from the lips of the young lawyer, and drawing a heavy bowie knife from his bosom, he plunged forward, the weapon uplifted for use the instant he should get within reach.

Alabama Joe did not pause to ask which the threatened blow was intended for—man or beast—but grasped the uplifted hand with a force that would not be denied, wrenching it so sharply that the weapon dropped from the benumbed fingers, disappearing in the muddy waters between them.

"Don't be a p'izen fool, man," the swamp-ranger hissed into the ear of the young lawyer. "You can't do him no good, an' by tryin' you'll only make the boys think you b'long to the same onery gang. Git ashore, an' mind—I've got my eye on ye."

Whatever the cause, Lee Ovelman ceased to struggle, and mutely obeyed the words of Alabama Joe. He may have been cowed by the significant tone in which the other spoke, or else was satisfied with seeing the refugee freed from the teeth of the hounds and dragged out of the water by Cherokee Sam.

Several of the men had kept their torches alight throughout the confused scramble, and by the aid of these, the mingled mud and blood was rubbed off of the prisoner's face sufficiently to admit of his identification as one of the men they were seeking.

"Fred Ackley!" cried Alabama Joe, in a tone of no little gratification. "But somebody's spiled the looks of his figger-head; 'pears like he'd bin shot with a pokeberry an' mustard poultice!"

Truly, the miserable wretch presented anything but an agreeable sight as he lay there in the torch-light.

It will be remembered that Zenas Dawson, while besieged in Crazy John's cabin, fired a shot at one of his enemies, who was removing the chinking from between the logs, in hopes of shooting the young lawyer. The cry which followed that shot was uttered by Fred Ackley, the bullet having struck his right cheek-bone, shattering it and terribly lacerating the flesh.

Satisfied that Dawson was doomed to a horrible death beyond the slightest possibility of escape, and knowing that they would almost certainly be hunted hard and long by the thoroughly aroused settlers, he and Josh Howe pitched the dead body of their companion in evil into the flames, then plunged deeper into the swamp, fortunately being ignorant of the fact that Alabama Joe had left his canoe in concealment only a few rods from the lone cabin.

Ackley's wound bled profusely, despite the bandages applied to it, and he steadily grew weaker as the forced march was continued. Josh Howe kept with him until they made the discovery that they were being trailed with hounds. Ackley knew that his only hope was in breaking his trail and hiding until the hunt should have passed him by, and if Howe had kept to his part of the agreement, this plan would have succeeded beyond a doubt.

Making all haste to the lagoon, they entered the water, then turned and waded for several rods down-stream, until they found a low-hanging limb of a bushy-topped tree stretching out over the lagoon. Aided by Howe, Ackley soon climbed into the tree by means of this limb, and hid himself therein.

It was agreed upon between them, that Howe was to retrace his steps up-stream and cross directly opposite where their trail entered the water, thus leading off the pursuing hounds until he himself could give them the slip. But instead of doing this, Howe preferred to sacrifice his friend, and knowing that Ackley was

unable to see him in the gloom, he swam swiftly down the bayou for fully a mile, before emerging.

Still, the hounds might have been baffled, had not an unlucky accident occurred to mar the refugee's hopes. Fearful of discovery by the growing light, he attempted to better his position, and, trusting his weight upon a dead limb, was precipitated down into the water, where the hound quickly assailed him.

In the struggle the bandage was torn from his face and the wound set to bleeding afresh. The mingled blood and slime, together with his greatly swollen face, rendered him a truly hideous object.

"That makes two out o' the three accounted fer," added Alabama Joe, arising from the examination of the captive's face. "But thar's one more left, not countin' in them as set the p'izen imps free. Start the hounds out ag'in, Dan; le's make a clean sweep o' the business, now we've got fairly started."

"Make sure o' him fust," growled Dick Brown, with a venomous glance at Ackley, which told how deeply rankled the ignominious treatment he had received at the hands of that worthy's friends. "We've ketched him red-handed, an' I say save the trouble o' totin' him 'long o' us, by stringin' him up."

This sanguinary proposition was eagerly seconded by nearly every one of those engaged in the man-hunt, and a dozen hands were outstretched to grasp the wounded wretch, while Brown hastily unwound a pliant rope from around his waist. But two voices were raised in determined opposition. Alabama Joe struck aside the eager hands, and then stood astride the prostrate form, his pistols drawn and cocked. And at his right shoulder stood Lee Ovelman, his demeanor no less resolute.

"Thar shain't be no murder nur hangin' out o' hand done while I kin pull trigger or handle a knife," cried the swamp-ranger in clear, ringing tone that carried conviction with it. "This man deserves death, I don't deny it; but he is a man, an' he shell hev a fa'r trial, an' a chance to show why he shouldn't be hung, afore a jedge an' jury, or else you've got to rub me out jest as I stan'. You know me, boys, an' kin jedge how easy that little job's like to prove, ef you try it on."

"You can count me in, too," said Ovelman, with a quiet determination that spoke louder than words.

There were some growls of discontent, and more than one outspoken threat, coupled with hints that the trio were birds of one feather. Had there been any one among the malcontents bold enough to lead the onset, it would have gone hard with Ackley and his defenders, but few men care to throw their lives away in such a cause. Even a stranger to him could have told that Alabama Joe was uttering no idle threat, from his unflinching front and the steady glow in his large eyes.

"Give us your word that you'll take him back to town an' hold him safe ontel we come, an' we won't make no more trouble," finally said Brown, after a brief, whispered consultation with his more earnest backers. "He ain't worth honest men's cuttin' each other's throats over him, anyhow."

"I'll do that," promptly replied Alabama Joe, uncocking his pistols and replacing them in his belt. "I'd go as far to see the dirty rascal hung as the best o' ye, but I like to hev things done up in ship-shape style. An' you all 'll be satisfied that I'm actin' fer the best, when once you git cooled down. But I reckon I'd better take another man along, to make sure the slippery critter don't play any bugs onto me when we git in a boggy bit o' travelin'. You, stranger, I reckon, 'll make a good mate," he added turning abruptly upon the young lawyer.

"I'd rather be excused," said Ovelman, hastily.

"It'll be the best thing you kin do," said the swamp-ranger, with a keen look into the other's eyes that carried a peculiar might with it. "Tain't healthy work for strangers to the swamps, sech travelin' as the boys'll be likely to do. You'd best come."

It may have been that Ovelman was convinced by this argument, or he may have read a deeper significance in the words of the tall scout than did the other men standing around; but be that as it may, he made no further objection to bearing Alabama Joe company, and assisted him in setting the prisoner upon his feet.

"Now my fine feller," said Alabama Joe, addressing Ackley, "you've got to go back to town, an' thar's only two ways fer you to choose from. One is to walk on your own feet. The other is to hev a grape vine tied 'round your neck fer to drag you behind us. Git thar you must, an' you're too big a load o' nat'ral cussedness fer us to tote on our backs. Take your choice."

The fellow did not hesitate. He was only too glad of the chance to get away from that group of sternly frowning faces. And in a few moments the trio were out of sight of the still glowing torches.

Alabama Joe was strangely silent for one of his naturally loquacious disposition, nor were either of his companions inclined to talk. A

strange apprehension seemed to weigh heavily upon the spirits of them all.

Alabama Joe did not follow along the back-trail, but chose a more direct course through the swamp. He seemed anxious to reach their destination as soon as possible, and for two hours pressed the prisoner on at a rapid rate.

At the end of that time Ackley began to grow somewhat troublesome, and lagged in his walk as though greatly exhausted, which he doubtless was, but Alabama Joe felt confident that a good share of it was only pretense. For a time he confined himself to threats alone, but at length the prisoner flung himself down at the foot of a huge tree, declaring that he could not, would not stir a single step further.

"You may as well kill me outright," he muttered doggedly, speaking with difficulty, owing to his injured face. "If I was going to a wedding instead of to a hanging I couldn't walk any further."

"It's a pity," said Alabama Joe, with a note of mock commiseration in his voice, as he drew his knife and clipped off a long, slender dog-wood shoot. "It al'ays gives me the headache to see a man licked like a runaway nigger. I'd a heap ruther you'd get up an' travel ahead. When I get a headache it makes me mad all over, an' that don't 'gree with my constitution. Ef I ax it as a favor, won't you please git up an' travel?"

The man made no reply, but an ugly look came over his face as Alabama stood beside him coolly clipping off the little twigs and leaves. Then he cast a quick glance toward Ovelman, who was leaning against the tree, his gaze fixed moodily upon the ground.

Whether or no it was in answer to that glance the lawyer did speak a word in the fellow's favor.

"Better give him a reasonable time to rest and recover his strength, Mr. Freeman. He has lost a great deal of blood, and that has weakened him. The whole day is before us, and there is no particular hurry, as I see. Let him rest."

"Bein' as you never met him afore yesterday, frind, 'tain't so strange he kin fool ye," said Alabama Joe, with rather pointed emphasis. "But I know the critter better. He's only contrairy. He kin walk ef he will—an' I reckon he will afore I'm done with him. You understand me, Fred Ackley."

But the fellow still remained obstinate, and refused to arise even when Alabama Joe enforced his commands by a couple of smart strokes of the rod.

All are aware that passion grows with what it is fed upon, and as Alabama Joe felt confident that Ackley was perfectly able to travel further, it is not to be wondered at that his ire arose with every blow he dealt, or that the strokes fell swifter and harder until the slender rod was splintered half way down to his hand.

Ackley bore this tingling punishment without uttering a cry or groan, but he slid from a sitting to a prone position, during the writhing which he could not wholly control. And Alabama Joe, as the rod grew shorter in his hand, stooped lower in order to make his blows tell the more surely.

Suddenly a bit of the switch flew up and struck across his eyes, causing him to instinctively throw his head back. This change of position brought Ovelman once more within his range of vision, and he saw the lawyer in the act of drawing a pistol, his thumb upon the hammer.

Quick as thought he rose erect, a pistol in his own hand, the old suspicions returning to his mind with redoubled force.

With a short, cold laugh, Ovelman allowed his pistol to slip back into place, and raised the hand to stroke his mustaches, as he spoke:

"You want to be a little more careful, Mr. Freeman, when you are dealing with such treacherous cattle. A moment later, and that fellow would have shot you with your own pistol."

"It was to shoot him, then, that you were drawing your revolver?" uttered Alabama Joe, slowly.

"Of course—what else?" and the black eyebrows of the young lawyer formed an arch of innocent surprise.

"Don't reckon you thought how much easier 'twould 'a' bin jest to've hollered out to let me know, did ye?" laughed the swamp-ranger, seemingly perfectly satisfied with this plausible explanation.

"The words were on the tip of my tongue just as you started up," was the easy reply, as Ovelman chose and bit the end off of a fresh cigar. "I suppose you saw what the fellow was at?"

"Yes, I saw it, an' I won't give the p'izen critter another chance like that," was the quiet response. "Ef you'll jest watch him a bit while I cut down that grapevine—so! Now, Fred, you hain't fergot what I told you back yender at the bayou. Either you've got to walk, or I'll snake you 'long at the end o' this grapevine. Take your choice."

Still the refractory prisoner made no move to arise, and Alabama Joe tied a loop of the vine around his neck with a bit of fishing-line, then

started ahead as though fully determined to put his threat into execution. But Ovelman suddenly bent over the fellow and assisted him to arise.

"Lead on—I'll follow," said Ackley, sullenly.

"I don't drive my team in that way," retorted Alabama Joe. "You, stranger, go on ahead. I'll tell you if you stray out o' the right course. If it's all the same, I'd rather fetch up the tail end."

If Ovelman noticed any trace of suspicion in this arrangement, he made no remark upon it, but quietly and naturally accepted the position assigned him, while Ackley followed close at his heels, Alabama Joe coming some ten feet behind.

For a few moments it seemed as though all trouble was at an end, but then Ackley, jerked swiftly, and grasping the grapevine, jerked Alabama Joe forward, then darted past him, with Ovelman close at his heels.

As Joe recovered his balance, the lawyer thrust a pistol almost against his face and fired. The swamp-ranger fell backward, but almost instantly struggled to his knees and drew his revolver, firing two shots in swift succession after the fleeing forms.

But then a wild cry broke from his lips as he fell forward upon his face, writhing in agony: "MERCIFUL GOD! MY EYES ARE SHOT AWAY!"

CHAPTER XX.

TREACHERY AND CUNNING.

At last the young lawyer, Lee Ovelman, had cast aside the mask he wore, and revealed himself as he really was, a treacherous, cunning rascal, whose conscience revolted at nothing which he deemed necessary to his own safety, or the furtherance of his crafty, deep-laid schemes.

He, with the criminal he had rescued from the hands of Alabama Joe, ran swiftly away from the spot where the dastardly shot had been fired; but swifter still came two ragged bullets whistling past them, telling the traitor that his work was but bunglingly done, after all—that Alabama Joe was upon his feet once more, not lying a dead man there amid the rank grass and weeds covering the swamp slime and mud.

The course he had pursued during the last four-and-twenty hours, was proof sufficient of courage and strength of nerve, but at the thought of the enraged swamp-ranger in hot pursuit, a thrill of abject terror agitated the young lawyer, and side by side with Fred Ackley he raced through the gloomy swamp, expecting with each passing moment to have his flight cut short by an avenging bullet.

But no additional shots followed the first two, nor, as he cast a quick glance backward over his shoulder, could Ovelman discover any one in pursuit of them. Could it be that, though not instantaneously fatal as he had intended, his shot had slain Alabama Joe, after all?

It must be so, else the swamp-ranger would even now be upon them, for of personal fear, he scarcely knew the name, and was too hot-headed to think of cunning circumvention while his enemy was before him.

Calling to Fred Ackley, and pointing out to him a certain clump of bushes, Ovelman leaped far to one side, then crouched down under cover, his revolver in readiness for use in case Alabama Joe should be following them. His comrade in crime promptly imitated this movement, and the ambush was formed.

They had their labor alone for their pains. There was no one pursuing them. The only mortal who might have told of their dastardly crime, was lying yonder, weltering in his gore.

Ere many minutes passed, Ovelman became convinced that his affright had been unfounded, and with that conviction, his natural audacity returned.

"Ackley," he uttered, in a cautious tone, "steal back on that side of the trail, keeping under cover as well as you can. I'll take this side. If he is afoot, make sure of him. There must be no half work now."

Ackley obeyed without a word, and cautiously, on the look-out for a barely possible ambush, the two men slowly made their way back to the spot where Alabama Joe had been so treacherously dealt with. Their suspense was not of long duration. They saw the swamp-ranger lying prone upon his face, without life or motion, yet Ovelman held his pistol half-poised as he drew near his victim.

But there was no feigning, as he feared. The body was already growing stiff, and as he slipped his hand beneath his victim's breast, there was not the faintest fluttering of the heart.

"Better let me make sure," growled Ackley, his wolfish eyes aglow, as Ovelman turned the body over. "We thought the other hound was dead, but he came to life again, in time to spoil all our carefully-laid plans. Let me give him a touch of his own knife—curse him!"

"Hold your hand, Fred Ackley, or by the devil we both serve, I'll let daylight into your black heart—and that would be the noblest job of work my hand ever wrought!" uttered the young lawyer, with a fierce earnestness that awed the more brutal ruffian. "Enough that I

killed this man to save your neck from the hangman's rope, although I knew that one drop of his blood was worth more than your whole carcass. So don't tempt me too far, while I remember that, or it will be all the worse for you!"

"You were bound by your oath—if he had been your own brother, you dared not have acted different."

"Say no more, or I'll break my oath so far as to forever silence your tongue—fool! don't you see that you are playing with fire, and tempting your own death?"

The slow-witted ruffian did see it now, and shrunk back from the fierce, menacing glitter of those eyes. He was unarmed, and dare not attempt to possess himself of the weapons belonging to Alabama Joe, lest Ovelman should construe the act into a menace, and so shoot him down before he could defend himself. But this was no intention of the young lawyer's. Instead, he stooped and secured the pistol that had fallen from Alabama Joe's hand, and gave it to his companion in sin, saying:

"You may need it before we are out of the swamp."

"Then you are going with me?"

"Of course. When this body is found, as it must be, sooner or later, they will know that I must have killed or helped to kill the man, and the sooner we get down the river, the better for our health. Mabry must do the rest of his work himself, for we can help him no further."

"Better hide the carrion; put it in some mud-hole," suggested Ackley, a little doubtfully.

"There's not time to hide it so those hounds wouldn't nose it out. Besides, we couldn't rub out our trail. No, we can't lose time for that. Come!"

"Which way, then? To the river?" asked Ackley.

"Yes; that will be the best. We can hunt up a canoe, and thus take our ease while we are hiding our trail."

With a lingering look at the body of Alabama Joe, as though reluctant to leave it without striking one blow in satisfaction for the sharp flogging those nerveless hands had so recently administered to him, Fred Ackley obeyed the summons and led the way at a rapid pace, almost run, in accordance with the directions of the young lawyer.

Moodily enough Lee Ovelman followed after. He felt that he had slain a man whose life was worth more than those of a thousand such brutal wretches as the one preceding him. Even at the moment of firing the fatal shot, he could hardly resist the temptation to change his purpose at the last instant, and send the leaden missile crashing through the brain of the villainous refugee instead.

During those few hours that had elapsed since their acquaintance began, he had learned to respect and admire the swamp-ranger, as he had never before esteemed and regarded living man save himself. And yet he had killed him, to save a worthless rascal from a justly deserved doom. He had known that he must kill him, from the moment that Alabama Joe proposed to conduct the prisoner back to town. Such had been his intention when he objected to the swamp-ranger's choice of himself as a companion during that journey. He had intended slipping away from the party of man hunters, and following after the prisoner and his guard, meant to shoot down the latter and set the former at liberty. But he was afraid to insist when Alabama Joe spoke to him in that significant tone. He knew that the swamp-ranger suspected him, and that his life would be in danger, were those suspicions put in words, while the man-hunters were already so wrought up and ripe for summary doings. Hence he yielded, though he knew that by so doing, his future peril would be greatly increased.

When Alabama Joe caught sight of him drawing a pistol during the flogging of Fred Ackley, it was his deliberate intention to shoot him down in his tracks, though he warded off all suspicion, as he believed, by his adroit acting when confronted. And as he raised Ackley to his feet, he gave the prisoner the assurance that he would shortly rescue him.

From first to last it had been a deliberately planned murder, and never once until the instant of action did the assassin hesitate, as already hinted, though he knew that the man he was about to slay, was infinitely the superior of either himself or Ackley.

His reasons for persisting in a course so repugnant to himself, may be readily explained.

It is a well known and undisputed fact that at the period of which this story treats, as well as for years before and afterward, there was a great criminal league, existing principally in the Southern and South-western States, the members of which were bound by heavy and fearful oaths to be true to the Family, and to one another, even at the cost of their own lives. This league numbered its adherents by thousands, not only among the lower classes, but too often among the highest officers of state. This, too, is upon record.

Lee Ovelman belonged to the Family, and

when the occasion arose, he made use of its subtle machinery to further his own ends. Just what that purpose was, will be divulged in good time. Suffice it that he learned of Zenas Dawson's intention of visiting the village of Rushville, and had no difficulty in obtaining the purport of that visit. For reasons of his own, Ovelman resolved that the young lawyer should be fatally disappointed, although, had not blind chance or fortune stood his friend, he would have dipped his hands deep in crime all for naught.

He sent a message to the head-quarters of the State Division of the League, charging the man known as Stephen Craythorne with having discovered the secrets of the Mississippi Division through cunning espial while pretending to be deranged in his mind; with having sent the information thus gained to the Governor of the State, who had immediately dispatched a confidential messenger named Zenas Dawson, bearing the pardon papers for a crime committed long ago by Craythorne, which were to be given him as a reward, in case his information should prove reliable.

The commander of the Mississippi Division at once sent out a trusty band to prevent the meeting ever taking place, with full instructions how to act. But prompt as they moved, they would have been too late only for the mad fit that sent Craythorne off into the swamp just before Dawson arrived at Rushville in quest of him.

The fertile brain of Ovelman, who had his own reasons for being upon the ground, in connection with cunning Josh Howe, leader of the band from head-quarters, soon took advantage of this unforeseen event, and it was decided to have Craythorne put out of the way with an outward semblance of justice.

In accordance with this plan, the trap was set into which both Craythorne and Dawson fell, though, thanks to Alabama Joe and an overruling Providence, they escaped the cunning meshes with life.

This explanation will account for the part which Ovelman played during the trial, his seeming blunders being in reality, a fine piece of acting.

It will also show why he risked so much in order to free Fred Ackley from captivity, and if borne in mind, will give the keynote to more than one action already or to be recorded.

Busily pondering over the schemes which have only been shadowed forth in these pages as yet, Lee Ovelman followed hard upon the heels of his brutish comrade for the nonce. Fortunately for his own peace of mind, Ackley did not dream of the fierce temptation which was growing stronger with every moment in the heart of his follower: the temptation to put a bullet through his skull, and thus clear his own shoulders of the crime which had been committed, by swearing that Ackley had shot Alabama Joe, being slain by the latter in return, as he fled.

Once again Lee Ovelman stealthily drew his revolver.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DESPERATE SUBTLE REFUGE.

ONE more step and Fred Ackley would have fallen to the blood-stained earth with a revolver bullet through his brain, without knowing what had hurt him, nor from whose hand the blow came. But the end was not to come thus nor just here.

With a muffled exclamation Ackley turned abruptly toward Ovelman, his features expressing strong agitation. Not because he suspected the narrow escape he had just made from a violent death at the hands of his comrade, for he never even noticed the fact of Ovelman's having his revolver drawn in his hand.

What startled them both—for the young lawyer was also bending his ear in breathless attention, while his face shone ghastly white through the spatters of mud and bloody scratches that marred its skin—was a clear, bell-like note thrice repeated at brief intervals, a note full of melody even to the untrained ear when subdued and mellowed by distance, but to them a note that had often sent the hot blood dancing madly through their distended veins, at such times sweeter far than the soft, shy accents of young love itself. But then they had been the hunters, following the musical tongued pack over bush and brae, through brake and bramble, while now the chances were that they would be the hunted.

The bell-note was that of Cherokee Dan's favorite hound, Heart-eater, and as the melancholy-sweet sound was repeated, both Ovelman and Ackley knew that the dog was steadily approaching them. Not along the trail they had just made in the plastic swamp mud, but at right angles to that course, and at a speed that would bring it to the trail inside of five minutes.

It was scarcely possible that the hound was still following upon the track of Josh Howe. Though cunning enough, that worthy was hardly sufficiently bold to double thus, when every step would be taking him nearer to the scene of his crime, and consequently to his bitter enemies. More likely the trail had been lost, and the baffled party of man-hunters were taking the nearest route homeward, to make sure of the

prize sent on ahead. But whichever might be the actual case, the keen-nosed hounds would hardly cross the fresh trail without calling attention to it, especially as they had for hours been tracing up one of those sets of footprints. There was little doubt but what the half-breed would recognize Fred Ackley's tracks, and Ovelman knew that strong suspicions would be immediately aroused by the absence of the third and most important one of the triad—Alabama Joe. Then, to solve the mystery, the dogs would be put upon the fresh trail.

The young lawyer felt that he was too much worn and fatigued to outrun the hounds to the river, while he knew that Ackley was even less fit for such a terrible test of strength and swiftness. They would speedily be overtaken, and even should they escape being pulled down by the powerful hounds, it was highly improbable that they could dispose of the four animals in time to elude Cherokee Dan and his companions. Then, to betake themselves to flight would be to acknowledge themselves guilty.

These reflections passed through the brain of the young lawyer with wonderful rapidity, as he stood with ear inclined in an attitude of listening. And for a few moments his heart sunk in despair. But not for long. A bold, desperate plan flashed across his mind, and knowing how precious every breath of time was, he acted at once.

With a quick, sure grasp he tore the revolver from Ackley's waist, then thrust his own pistol into the astounded ruffian's face, sternly saying:

"Be sensible, and I will save both your life and my own. Be obstinate, and oath or no oath, I will blow your brains out as you stand. Within five minutes those hounds will strike our trail, and tired as we are, will run us down in less than ten more. If taken while trying to escape, we will both be hung out of hand. Trust to me, and I will pull you through yet—I swear it by my oath to the league!"

"But I want to know *how*," faltered Ackley, trembling in every limb like a very craven, yet still true to his nature, suspicious of the man who offered to save him.

"We cannot escape by flight. We would be captured, and if not killed outright, taken along the back trail to see what had become of Alabama Joe. That would seal our fate beyond a doubt. By my plan there would be a chance for us both. Promise to do as I direct—to yield to my will, and allow me to explain everything as best I can, without putting in a word until I have first given you the cue—or, by the heavens above! I will send a bullet through your brain with as little compunction as though you were a mad-dog! Decide—and quickly!"

"Do it your own way," muttered the ruffian, sullenly, but adding in a more malignant tone: "Don't think you will give me the slip, leaving me to hang alone. If I am fated to be hung, you and others shall keep me company, for I will make a clean breast of all I know; mind that!"

Ovelman gave no sign of having heard this significant threat, though it was registered in his mind, but removing the belt from around Ackley's waist, he bound the ruffian's arms behind his back. Then he picked up Alabama Joe's revolver and thrust it into his own belt.

This done, he once more cautioned his seeming captive, and pushed forward in the direction from whence the deep baying of the hound had emanated.

His first suspicions were quickly confirmed. The leading hound soon burst into view, running free, but not upon a trail. After the break in the trail at the bayou, though the hounds picked up the broken spoor, it was followed only for a short mile, for Josh Howe had found a canoe, and paddled in it down the bayou and into the Black River. This fact settled, all knew that there was little hope of overtaking him upon foot, and their ardor being cooled by the toil they had already undergone, there were no dissentient voices when a return to the village was proposed. It was while taking the most direct route homeward that the hound gave voice, opening upon the fresh trail of a bear, but as the party were too thoroughly jaded to care for entering upon a hunt for bruin, Carver called his dogs off, and pursued his course.

The hounds gave one note of warning as they saw the two men, then crouched down as though waiting for the signal of their master to guide their future course. But Ovelman took the bull by the horns, and called aloud to Carver and his party.

Their surprise and excitement were great, as they came up, and many were the questions poured in upon the young lawyer, who coolly met them, and said in a slow, resolute tone:

"I will explain everything, but first let me tell you one thing. I have risked my life to keep your prisoner for you, but I am determined that he shall not be murdered. He must be taken to town, and there tried before a judge and jury. I, myself, will prosecute him, and as he will certainly be found guilty of murder, will help to hang him, after the judge has regularly passed sentence upon him. But he must have a trial, that people may not call us as bad as he is—"

"Whar's Alabama Joe?" demanded Dick Brown, no longer able to restrain his impatience.

"You will learn all the sooner, if you hear me out," sharply retorted Ovelman. "I say that I consider myself responsible for the safe delivery of this criminal into the hands of the judge, whoever he may be, at Rushville, and the man who attempts to injure him before I so deliver him, I will shoot down without a moment's hesitation, though you murder me the next instant. As white men and gentlemen, I ask you to give me this pledge. He will surely hang as you can guard us both to town. I am speaking for your own credit, as well as my own."

These words were convincing, and without any hesitation, the required pledge was given.

Ovelman briefly thanked them, and then gave his version of what had taken place.

He said that they had been quietly pursuing their way to the burned cabin beside the bayou, when the prisoner suddenly turned upon them, snatched a pistol from Alabama Joe's belt, shot him dead and then fled at full speed. That he followed hard upon his heels, ordering him to stop or die. That the ruffian turned upon him and they exchanged shots, without effect, when he closed with and overpowered the assassin. That in his ignorance of the right course to pursue, he had struck out with his captive in the direction of the river, meaning to follow it up to the main road leading to Rushville, when fortunately he heard the notes of the hounds.

The wisdom of his having first extracted a pledge that Ackley should not be harmed until the village was reached, was made clear as he told his cunning story. Only for that, the trembling wretch would have been literally torn limb from limb when the dastardly murder of Alabama Joe was told.

"Mebbe he wasn't killed dead?" feebly suggested one.

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt," returned Ovelman, with genuine regret in his tones that told with his hearers. "As soon as I secured the fellow, I forced him to return, in just the hope you express. But the poor fellow was dead—his brains all over his face. I tried to restore him, but in vain."

Once more the life of the prisoner was in danger, but the extorted pledge was remembered in time, and the enraged man-hunters consoled themselves with the reflection that he would soon meet his deserts.

On being asked the question whether he could lead them back to the spot where the tragedy occurred, Ovelman hesitated. He was thinking whether the tracks in the swamp mud would confirm or refute his story, but before he could decide, Cherokee Dan answered for him, by suggesting that the hounds should be put upon the trail; they could pick it up as fast as any of them would care to follow.

Fortunately for Ovelman, there was not the faintest doubt entertained of the truth of the story he had told, and thus the sign was not very carefully read in their haste to reach the spot where their friend had fallen, where a joyful surprise awaited all save Lee Ovelman.

Instead of the dead body they expected to see, they were greeted by Alabama Joe in the flesh!

The bullet so hastily discharged by Ovelman, had passed through the skin directly above the swamp-ranger's eyes, cutting to the bone and forever spoiling his eyebrows. The severe shock, added to the belief that his eyes were shot away, deprived Alabama Joe of his senses, and for a time actually suspended the action of his heart, thus deceiving the young lawyer and his comrade in sin.

Still almost blind, Alabama Joe listened in silence to the explanations eagerly given him by first one then another of his excited friends. Ovelman stood by, expecting with every moment to hear the listener dash his cunning lies to the ground with one word of truth, and holding himself in readiness to sell his life dearly rather than be taken back to town as a felon, but that word was not spoken.

To all appearance Alabama Joe believed the tale he was told, and even Ovelman could detect no covert meaning in his tones as he advanced and thanked him for enabling him, Alabama Joe, to redeem his pledge of taking the prisoner safely to the village.

"I won't forget it soon," he added, earnestly. "I'll try an' pay you back for all your trouble, in time."

Did he mean anything more than appeared upon the face of these words? That was the question Lee Ovelman asked himself more than once during the journey to the ruins of the lone cabin, but the rendezvous was reached without his being able to give a satisfactory answer to his own question.

The doctor was still there, in charge of Zenas Dawson, who had passed through his fiery ordeal much better than any one could have expected.

But little thought was given to him by either Alabama Joe or the party of man-hunters, for almost at the same instant with their arrival, Tom Clark, the man, who it will be remembered, had been sent to the village after a horse

and blankets to form a litter for the purpose of conveying the wounded man to the town, where he could receive the care essential to his recovery, entered the little clearing out of breath, bearing truly startling tidings.

"Ruth Livingstone has been stolen away from home!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A DARING ABDUCTION.

THE story of that truly eventful night has not yet been wholly told, and leaving the swamp for the present, the course of events calls us back to the Washington Arms and its inmates.

Ruth Livingstone was left almost alone with the wounded and dying. Save for one old negress who was stationed at the bedside of James Carbry, the mortally wounded sheriff, and possibly one or two other servants who had fallen so soundly asleep after the exhausting excitements of the day, that the recent alarm failed to arouse them, the maiden was the sole guardian of the tavern. But she had no thought of personal danger; surely she was as safe there as she could have been in the center of an army devoted to her interests alone. The fears and doubts that strongly agitated her were all for one abundantly able to take care of himself. Yet this was only natural, considering what had passed between her and Alabama Joe; a painfully pleasant anxiety that is one of the inseparable concomitants of genuine love, before time has tempered its transports.

Yet perhaps it was as well that she was not permitted to dwell long upon these morbid fancies, or her nerves would have suffered and been poorly fitted to bear up and sustain her through the severe trials that were even then crowding upon her.

She was sitting beside her father, who was lying under the influence of the opiate administered by Doctor Brady before setting out upon his troubled ride through the swamp, when the aged negress who had been watching over James Carbry, thrust her frosted head into the room, her eyes rolling wildly as she beckoned to her young mistress.

"Marse Jim done woke up, honey," she hurriedly explained as Ruth hastened to the door.

"He done woke up jes' now, but he do talk so pow'ful quar dat dis yer niggah skeered to stay dar wid him alone any longer. He keep a-axin' fo' somebody, an' he ketched my han' an' souse it, an' went on mighty quar, like. Ef you'd only go to him fo' a bit, honey," she added, coaxingly.

Ruth never hesitated, though she could not help remembering what Doctor Brady told her; that poor Jim Carbry would waken only on the verge of the grave if he roused up at all.

He was lying still as they entered the room, his eyes fixed upon the door with an eager, yearning look as though he expected and was awaiting their coming. Despite the care with which she had schooled her nerves, Ruth trembled as she noted the wonderful change that came over the shrunken, haggard features of the dying man as his gaze fell upon her. His face seemed glorified as he stretched out his arms toward her, a name dropping softly from his lips. A name, but not her own.

"Honor—darling—I knew you would not let me die here all alone, without one last farewell."

It was the hardest task of her life, but the maiden proved herself equal to the occasion.

She knew enough of the sheriff's story to carry out the part that was in a measure forced upon her. Surely it was no great sin to impose upon a dying man, if thereby his last moments were rendered happier?

Ruth did not think so, at any rate, and knelt down beside the low bed, murmuring soft words of endearment that were not hard to call up to her lips, for Carbry was known and liked by everybody, his one fault being an uncontrollable passion for strong liquor. She suffered her hand to rest within his palm, already growing cold before the near approach of death. She listened to his words, faint, broken and disconnected, yet breathing a love so deep and true, that were intended for another, and she answered him, not as that other would or could have done, but in such terms as made that death-bed hour the happiest of his life.

Awe-stricken, the old negress cowered at the foot of the bed, the only witness of that strange and impressive scene. She heard the faint, gasping whisper in which James Carbry uttered his last request.

"Kiss me, Honor—the first—the last time."

She saw Ruth bend over the dying man and touch her emotion-blanced lips to his, and she saw two pearly tears of genuine grief fall upon the bronzed and bearded face. She heard the last words that ever issued from the lips of poor James Carbry; a dying blessing that was meant for Honor Craythorne, but which surely would not harm the one who received it in her stead. She saw that the sheriff's life departed with that blessing, and turning softly opened the window that the spirit of the dead man might take its departure unimpeded.

Ruth bore up under the intense strain until

all was over, then turned sick and faint as death itself.

"Take me away—help me outside—fresh air!" she gasped, as the old negress caught her swaying form in her arms and kept her from falling.

With homely words of comfort and good cheer, the old woman half-led, half-carried the overtaken maiden out upon the piazza, into the fresh, sweet air of midnight. But well meant though the words were, speech jarred painfully upon Ruth's nerves, and presently she bade the woman enter the house to do what she could for the dead man, then go and watch beside the landlord's bed until she came in to relieve her.

Though no shrew, the servants had learned to obey Ruth without question or doubt, and as soon as the words were spoken, the maiden was left alone upon the veranda, lighted only by the glimmering stars that looked down in countless myriads.

All was still within the village since the departure of the man-hunters in pursuit of the escaped criminals, and leaning upon the balustrade that encircled the veranda, Ruth gave herself over to deep and all-absorbing thought. The theme or themes which busied her brain may readily be imagined, but there is no necessity for reproducing them here.

Though alone upon the veranda, as already stated, there were others besides Ruth Livingstone abroad upon that night, and at least one other who was sheltered by the denser shade cast by the overhanging roof of the piazza.

As once before, earlier upon the same night, a pair of evil eyes have been watching the maiden keenly ever since she emerged from the house. Then they were filled with an angry fire of hatred and mad jealousy toward the favored lover, Alabama Joe. Now, though glowing evilly, their expression was different; a fierce, devilish exultation filled their depths instead.

Slowly, noiselessly as a human serpent, the owner of those evil eyes raised himself up over the end of the flooring and balustrade toward which Ruth has partially turned her back, her attention being now fixed upon a faint light in the heavens above the swamp, in the direction, as she knew, of the lone cabin where Alabama Joe had left the wounded lawyer.

So wholly absorbed was she in watching this growing light which she vaguely feared boded some new danger to her bold lover, that a far less cautious enemy might have stolen to her side unheard. But that human shadow was not one to throw away a chance in the bold and desperate game he was playing, and a veritable phantom could not have advanced with less noise than he.

As he neared his intended victim, he fairly held his breath, lest it should give the alarm, as he spread out a thick blanket in readiness for the seizure. Crouching low for one brief breath—then he leaped lightly forward and flung the blanket over the maiden's head and shoulders, pinioning her arms with one of his own, lifting her off the floor with the same member, while his other hand held the muffling folds firmly over her face, thus stifling her screams and effectually preventing all outcry.

With wonderful activity and lightness in one thus incumbered, the captor ran silently down the steps leading from the veranda, where he was joined by several other men.

From the fact that no words were spoken or orders given, the prompt and concerted action of the persons engaged in this daring abduction, proved that the deed had been carefully planned and all the details mapped out beforehand.

In utter silence the abductors hastened through the outskirts of the little village, pausing not until they reached a small hollow that was thickly wooded. Here the man that bore Ruth Livingstone lowered her to the ground, and partially removed the suffocating blanket from her head and face, though holding a fold in readiness to smother any outcry she might attempt to make. But this precaution was needless. Brief as had been the transit from the tavern to the hollow, Ruth was almost suffocated when the muffler was loosened, and could only gasp painfully as the fresh air struck her face.

A few moments' inspection satisfied the abductor that no serious harm was done, and taking a silken handkerchief from his pocket, he bound it firmly over the face of the maiden in such a manner that, though her respiration was not seriously impeded, it would be impossible for her to utter a sound loud enough to be heard more than a few feet away. Nor was he satisfied with this precaution, but bandaged her eyes in a similar style, and fastened her wrists together in front of her person.

By the time these precautions were taken, the other men emerged from the wooded hollow, leading horses. One of these the leader mounted, resigning his captive to the care of one of his fellows until he had arranged matters to his liking, then received the maiden in his arms, supporting her upon his thighs and the padded pommel of the saddle.

By this time, Ruth had wholly recovered her senses, together with her usual cool courage, and swiftly raising her hands, endeavored to tear aside the bandage that fettered her tongue, struggling violently to escape from the arms

that encircled her form; but in vain. Her efforts were frustrated with the greatest apparent ease, and she was clasped still closer to the fellow's breast as he set his horse in rapid motion, two of his men riding in advance, the other pair bringing up the rear.

Gifted with more than common resolution of mind and strength of spirit, Ruth endeavored to fix and keep in her mind the direction they were following, but with poor success. Any one who has tried the experiment with closed eyes while riding, knows how easy it is to fancy oneself moving in exactly the opposite direction to that in which one *knows* one is proceeding, and that in a short time this fancy becomes a settled conviction. Thus it was with Ruth Livingstone, and within half an hour from the time of leaving the hollow, she was utterly at sea as to her present whereabouts.

At the end of twice that length of time, strange as the statement may appear, Ruth was asleep, and slumbering as soundly as though she were in her own cosy bed beneath the tavern roof.

The intense and varied excitements of the past thirty hours, had completely worn her out, mind and body, and the unusual strain upon her reasoning faculties as she endeavored to keep the course followed fixed in her mind, adding to the motion of the easily pacing horse which bore her through the night, caused her to yield to slumber, though in such a strange and precarious situation.

When she awoke, she knew that they had left the beaten road for the swamp, by the sound of trampling hoofs in the mud and water. By a strong exertion of will, she made no sound or motion, hoping to discover something that might advantage her; but in this she was disappointed.

Not a word was uttered, and after passing through what seemed to be a considerable stretch of water, the horses were halted upon firm ground, and dismounting, her captor deposited her at the foot of a tree, slipping the bonds from her wrists.

Obedient a natural impulse, Ruth raised her hands and tore the bandage from her eyes. For a few moments she could distinguish nothing, save that day had dawned, but presently she began to make out her surroundings. A sharp cry of wondering astonishment broke from her lips as she recognized a well known figure standing before her, regarding her sternly—the uncouth shape of Dandy the Dwarf!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SWAMP REFUGE.

WITH a dull, sickening pain at her heart, Honor Craythorne followed her father away from the lone cabin that had been her only home for years, bound she knew not whither, knowing only that he led the way and that it was her duty to accompany him uncomplainingly, wherever he might choose to go. Yet her heart swelled with grief as she cast a last lingering glance backward from the bank of the sluggish creek, for she knew that a few short hours would reduce that once pleasant home to a heap of glowing embers.

Perhaps Honor was the only person in the neighborhood who was not convinced that Stephen Craythorne was a madman beyond redemption, but her faith and loyalty never wavered.

She knew that he had spells of a strange, gloomy silence during which he wished to be alone, and on the approach of which he would make his preparations to leave her alone for a day or two—sometimes even for a week or more—while he buried himself in the swampy recesses. But these she believed, were only fits of despondency, caused by his constant brooding over the deep sorrows and bitter wrongs which had been heaped upon his bowed head in days gone by. And in this belief she was tacitly encouraged by her neighbors, who never spoke of the father's madness by its proper name before the daughter.

Yet mad the giant settler assuredly was on that night as he entered the canoe after his daughter and noiselessly paddled away from the spot.

There was only one thought in his mind. The black secret of the past which had been so long and carefully buried, was now unearthed, and the avengers of blood were upon his track, eager to hale him away to satisfy the claims of justice so long defrauded of its victim. All men were his enemies. There were none whom he could trust. Only the silent, reticent swamp that had so often afforded him shelter and comfort when he felt the mad impulse urging him to shout aloud unto all men, the black, corroding secret that was eating away his heart and brain—only the swamp remained his friend. Once within its secret recesses, and the burning band could be loosened from around his throbbing temples, as it had been time and again. He could bury himself deep in the wilderness and there, with naught to hear his frenzied words save the hoary trees, the silent waters and the speechless inhabitants of the gloomy waste, he would once more utter his terrible confession, thus relieving his surcharged heart.

When at the lowest point from where the lit-

tle log cabin could be seen in daylight, Stephen Craythorne held his canoe stationary with slow sweeps of the paddle, his gaze turned backward.

In utter silence they waited and watched until the red flames broke through the roof of the doomed cabin, then, as Honor covered her face with her hands and bowed her head to her knees, the better to stifle the bitter sobs that rose to her lips, the madman uttered a short, hard laugh, then plied his paddle in long, powerful sweeps that sent the canoe into the darkness beyond with almost the swiftness of a swallow.

It was a weird, never-to-be-forgotten ride by Honor Craythorne, but not even yet did she suspect the sanity of her father. He had been wrongfully accused of a terrible crime, and put upon trial for his life. He had been brutally flogged and half-hung. Surely this was enough to account for his actions since.

Honor asked no questions as to where they were going. She knew that speech only irritated her father when these sullen, moody fits were upon him, and now that their only house was given over to the flames, what matter whither they went? They two were alone in the world; so long as they were together, the rest mattered but little.

Hour after hour Stephen Craythorne drove the heavily leaden dug-out onward, without pause or cessation of those strong, steady sweeps. Down the winding creek to its embouchure, where its sluggish waters joined those of the Big Black river. Down the Chitta-Loosa with unfailing speed as though he was bound for the far-away Mississippi. But such was not his intention.

A dexterous twist of the broad-bladed paddle turned the prow of the canoe in a diagonal direction toward the left bank of the river, which course was maintained until the well-wooded shore loomed up dimly before them.

A brief but searching glance seemed to assure the giant that he was still above the place he sought, and as though his hot impatience was already yielding to the subtle influence which the air of the swamp always had over him, he suffered the canoe to drop slowly down with the current, only making use of the paddle in order to keep the craft bow on.

Honor had silently sobbed herself to sleep, and now lay with her head pillowed upon one arm, her troubles and sorrows all forgotten for the time being. Nor did she awaken when her father turned the prow of the canoe at right angles with the course they had been so long pursuing, entering the mouth of one of the numerous bayous that served to partially drain the Big Black Swamp.

This bayou, though the waters appeared to be quite deep and with a slight current, was narrow and with rather higher banks than usual. Both sides were fairly lined with trees and rank undergrowth. In more than one spot, the branches of the trees met above the narrow channel, forming a leafy roof of verdure so dense as to almost shut out the sunlight at mid-day, while now it was black as the mouth of Erebus itself.

Yet even where the gloom was the most intense, Stephen Craythorne evinced no doubt or hesitation, but urged the canoe onward as though he was gifted with the vision of some noctivagous animal, keeping in the middle of the bayou as by instinct, and making the turns, short or more gradual, without a single mistake.

Though the gloom was still as impenetrable as ever when Stephen Craythorne drove the prow of his dug-out to shore, he knew that the night for the outer world was almost spent, though the day was more tardy in making itself visible here in the midst of the swamp.

The shock of the landing, slight as it was, aroused the slumbering maiden, but not a sound did she utter, though totally ignorant of their present whereabouts. Her father was with her, and that was enough to quiet all fears.

Stephen Craythorne bade her sit still, then stepped across her body and drew the prow of the dug-out still further up on the muddy shore. Then he stooped, and, raising the light weight of his child in his arms, bore her up the gentle slope that led from the water's edge. Setting her upon her feet again, he returned to the canoe, and, filling his arms with a portion of its contents, struck out through the darkness, bidding Honor follow him closely.

This she was enabled to do by holding on to one end of a blanket that hung over the giant's shoulder, and, as the distance was by no means considerable, they were soon at the refuge which the madman had chosen—a huge monarch of the forest whose trunk was but a mere shell, the hollow extending upward for full fifty feet, though unless the bushes were parted which grew rankly around its base, this fact would not have been suspected by even a close observer.

Leaving Honor inside this hollow tree, Stephen Craythorne returned to the canoe and brought up the remainder of its lading, then, fumbling for a moment or two in the darkness, he struck a match and lighted a short bit of candle.

By this light Honor was enabled to inspect the interior of her strange home.

The hollow was fully eight feet in diameter, and had been cleared of all rotten or unsound wood as far up as the dim rays of the candle could reach. Above her head she could see a stout and substantial sort of scaffolding, the use of which was quickly made evident, as, by means of strong pins inserted into the trunk, Stephen Craythorne climbed upward with a bundle of bedding upon his shoulders. With these, he covered the scaffolding, and, calling to Honor, bade her ascend. This she did, unhesitatingly, and quietly lay down as he bade her, though the strangeness of the situation in which she found herself forbade all thought of sleep, even if nothing had occurred to alarm her.

The dawn of day was even closer at hand than Stephen Craythorne calculated, and scarcely had he descended from the resting-place prepared for his child, than from no great distance up the bayou there came to his ears the confused baying of deep-mouthed hounds and the shouting of human voices.

Though his brain was unquestionably affected by all that he had undergone, his reasoning powers were still clear enough to show him the folly of his first thought—that these sounds came from his enemies who were searching for him. But he believed that, in case they should come across his trail, they would only too eagerly hunt him down.

His first impulse was to summon Honor, and, entering the canoe, resume their flight; but, before he could quite decide, the growing light aided him to make a discovery that proved the impossibility of this scheme—for the canoe was gone!

With a brain on fire, the madman rushed down to the water's edge, almost unable to believe his eyes. But it was only too true. The canoe was gone, as though some evil power had spirited it away, for, search as keenly and closely as he might, he could find no footprints save his own in the moist soil.

Feeling that any attempt at obliterating his deeply imprinted trail would only sharpen the suspicions of the man-hunters without serving to baffle the hounds, in case they should strike it, Stephen Craythorne slowly returned to the hollow tree. He knew that it would be useless to attempt flight with Honor on foot, and looking to his weapons, he sternly awaited the result.

"It was nearly an hour later when the hounds and Cherokee Dan came into view, but the trail they were following was lost in the water nearly a hundred yards up the bayou. The half-breed bade his followers keep back, and advanced with his dogs, pausing at the point where the refugees had landed, and bending over the impress left by the prow of the dug-out in the soft, rich soil.

He knew then that the hunt was over, for with a start of fully an hour, his game was doubtless by now paddling down the Chitta-Loosa.

The youngest of the hounds gave tongue as it struck the madman's trail, but Dan harshly ordered it back.

Lucky it was that his curiosity was not strong enough to induce him to follow up the fresh trail, for a rifle that rarely missed was even then bearing upon his brain!

CHAPTER XXIV.

TWO CONGENIAL RASCALS.

DESPITE the solemn oath that bound him, in common with all other members of the great league, never to desert a brother in distress, but to sacrifice his own life, if needs be, in that brother's defense, Josh Howe was only too glad to shake off his injured comrade, and instead of drawing the chase after himself, as he might easily have done, and as he promised Fred Ackley he would do, he took the utmost precautions to preserve his own skin intact.

By breaking the trail in the manner already described in a previous chapter, he knew that he would be seriously endangering the safety of Ackley, if not insuring his discovery and capture; that, however, troubled him but little. If captured, after what had occurred, he felt sure that Ackley would not live long enough to confide the story of his treachery to a fellow member, and that was all he cared for.

As stated before, Howe swam nearly a mile down the bayou before he emerged from the water, nor would he have done so then, but for having heard the confused sounds which heralded the capture of his recent companion.

"They'll fool away so much time with Fred, that 'tain't no ways likely they can catch up with me before I can reach the river," he reasoned, with a heartless chuckle, as he pictured the predicament of his luckless comrade in the hands of the merciless man-hunters. "I don't care about swimming in these waters more than I can help—ugh!"

Despite his natural hardihood, the refugee shuddered as his fancy conjured up images of the terrible monsters with which he, together with most others of his class, religiously believed the rivers and bayou of the swamps were haunted, of which the gigantic gar-fish and monstrous cawana spoken of by Alabama Joe, were by no

means the most frightful. Lovers of the grotesquely horrible will find a rich treat awaiting their perusal when some gifted pen shall record in full the weird, fantastic legends of the Southern swamp country.

But Josh Howe did not brood long over these fancies, for he knew that he was not yet out of danger, and that it behooved him to make the most of the respite afforded him by the discovery of Fred Ackley. That would only whet the appetite of the man-hunters, and if once they reunited the broken trail, they would follow him with redoubled ardor.

He had hardly traversed half a mile since emerging from the water, before fortune, as he then believed, stood his friend once more, and entering the water he swam rapidly down to where the dug-out owned by Stephen Craythorne lay with its nose upon the bank. Still swimming, in order to avoid leaving any tell-tale marks, he pressed down upon the stern of the canoe and thus worked the prow free from its hold upon the bank, after which he adroitly climbed in over the stern, and grasping the paddle, urged the craft down-stream.

Swiftly as he worked, he was nearly caught in the act by Stephen Craythorne, and only for the dense shadow cast by the overhanging trees, he must have been discovered as it was, being then less than a score of yards away from where the enraged giant stood. Feeling secure in the gloom, Howe allowed the canoe to drift at will, rather than run the risk of plying the paddle while the giant stood there in listening.

Though himself unseen, owing to the difference in their position and background, the refugee had little difficulty in recognizing that gigantic form, and had it not been for the fact that he was followed, he would almost certainly have sought to complete the task assigned him, by a shot from one of the pistols which he had been careful to keep in serviceable condition through all.

"I know where to look for him if I make up my mind it's worth the trouble," he muttered to himself as the giant turned away from the water's edge. "But how he comes so far away from home so soon after that licking, gits me."

While busied with these thoughts, the refugee was not idle, but plied his paddle with the noiseless skill of an adept in the art, sending the dug-out swiftly down the bayou, nor pausing until the mouth was reached. Here he paused until assured that the watery stretch before him was free from enemies, then sent the canoe skimming across the waters of the Chitta-Loosa.

Knowing that there was no further danger to be apprehended from the hounds, and feeling himself capable of coping with any human foe in either skill or cunning, Josh Howe made up his mind that he had fled quite far enough for the present.

Landing upon a narrow island that was separated several rods from the mainland, he drew his canoe under cover, and composed himself for a little much needed sleep, trusting his instincts to awaken him in case any danger should threaten.

Suddenly awoken he did, though not until the declining sun told that the meridian had been passed an hour or more before. And almost the first thing he noticed was a canoe being paddled down the river near its middle. His first impulse was to cower low in order to avoid discovery, but a second glance showed him that, so far from being an enemy, the one occupant of the canoe was the man whom he most desired to meet—being none other than Lee Ovelman.

It will be remembered that we left the latter together with Alabama Joe and the remainder of the man-hunters at the ruins of the old cabin where Zenas Dawson so barely escaped death, by burning. During the tramp thither, after the unexpected finding of Alabama Joe living instead of dead, the young lawyer had done some hard thinking. He believed—indeed he did not see how it could possibly be otherwise—that Alabama Joe knew perfectly well his and not Ackley's was the hand that fired the treacherous shot that had so nearly ended his swamp-ranging for good and all, and that his quiet acceptance of the version given, was but a cunning mask, soon to be cast aside.

He knew, too, that unless he kept the pledge given Fred Ackley, that worthy would certainly expose him as one of the League that had wrought so much injury to the community at large, which, in the present excited state of the settlers, would be equivalent to a short shrift and a long rope. He knew that it would be impossible to set the prisoner free again, and had almost resolved to make a bold dash for the swamp as his best if not only chance for life and liberty, when the startling tidings brought by Tom Clark from the village, by throwing all present into a state of intense excitement gave him an opportunity of slipping away in the undergrowth, unseen and unsuspected.

He had been present when Alabama Joe looked to see whether the refugees had taken possession of his canoe to escape by water, and remembering its hiding-place, watched his chance and entering, paddled the dug-out down the bayou to where it joined the river, then turned the prow down-stream, meeting with no interruption until startled by the call of Josh Howe, who

the next moment paddled out as though to intercept him.

At first Ovelman failed to recognize the fellow, and sheered his canoe abruptly toward the left bank of the river. Thus, when recognition did come, Howe, instead of returning to his covert, made for the nearest land, only a few rods below the mouth of the bayou down which he had brought his stolen canoe.

Such are the seeming trifles upon which the lives of men so frequently hinge!

The first few minutes after landing were spent in making mutual explanations, but shortly the conversation took a more interesting turn.

"Well," said Ovelman, yawning. "I don't see any use in remaining here. We can do our talking as we go down the river, and for my part, the air of this section of the country feels decidedly unhealthy."

"Smells too strong of hemp, eh?" grinned Howe, but instead of arising, settling himself into a more comfortable position. "Fred will squeal, sure, if he is given the chance. I thought they would make short work with him last night, or I would 'a' been tempted to put a seal on his lips myself."

"It has been one piece of miserable botch-work from first to last," growled the young lawyer, with a bitter curse. "Everything that you have attempted has failed completely."

"There's one consolation," laughed the other, philosophically. "We can't be so monstrous bad, after all, or the devil would 'a' stood by us better'n he has done. But set down. There's no such mighty rush. Mebbe all ain't so black as you 'pear to think. Wouldn't wonder if I could give you a bit o' sweet to chaw 'long with the bitter."

There was a peculiar significance in the tones of the speaker that aroused the curiosity of Lee Ovelman, and knowing the fellow so well, he saw that he must fall in with his humor. But before he could seat himself, Howe spoke again:

"Bend over the bank an' take a look at my canoe. Think you ever see it afore?"

"Not to my knowledge," shortly replied Ovelman. "If you have anything of importance to say, spit it out in one mouthful. If not, I'm going down the river without wasting more time."

"Cool an' easy goes furdur in a day than hot an' hasty. Take a set-down and make yourself easy. You won't count the time lost, I give ye my word."

Smothering his impatience as best he could, the lawyer sat down, though inwardly chafing at the lazy insolence of the ruffian's tone.

"What did you mean by asking me if I had ever seen that dug-out before?" he asked, after a brief pause.

"That will come in later. Fust thing, I'd like to know why you was so anxious that old man should be made out the one who killed Dawson? Ef it's true that he has been playing the spy on the League, and has sent word to the gov'nor that he was ready and able to give him information plain enough to enable him to break up the Family, it was right enough that his tongue should be stopped; but why take so much trouble, when our laws say that a knife or bullet from the fust hand that can reach his heart shall be used? That's what bothers me."

"And so it may bother you to the end of the chapter," was the composed response. "The chief ordered you to silence the tongue of this man, and for any extra trouble you were put to by following my plan, I have already paid you liberally. Yet the man is alive and well at this moment. It would be no more than just, were I to insist on your refunding the money, since you have miserably failed in earning it."

"Stead o' that, you'll pay me just twice as much more," drawled the ruffian, with a provoking leer. "You needn't flash up like powder in a pan, man, for it won't go down with me. I ain't a man that does anybody's dirty work with his eyes shut, though you ain't the fust one that's tuck me fer such. I made them pay more than I would 'a' done if they had come out flat-footed, and so I mean you shall pay for trying to make me hunt your game with wool in my ears and over my eyes."

"I give you a chance just now, but you wouldn't take it. If you had, I'd 'a' let you off easy. Now I tell you that I know jest why you wanted the old man put out o' the world in that manner. You was afeared that if he was shot or knifed by nobody knew who, suspicion would be thrown on you, since you was the only one that could profit by his death, and was in this neighborhood at the very time, without any particular business. You can't deny it, fer I've got the papers that tells the hull story."

During this speech, spoken with irritating coolness and insolence, Ovelman had been watching Howe with a gaze that never wavered. He saw that the fellow was speaking the truth, though until the word papers was mentioned, he could not imagine how or where the ruffian gleaned his information.

Then he started to his feet with an angry oath, only to be confronted by a cocked and leveled revolver.

"Cool an' easy! Set down ag'in and keep quiet, or I'll blow the hull top o' your head off!"

CHAPTER XXV.

DANDY TAKES HIS REVENGE.

THE emotion that Ruth Livingstone felt as she recognized Dandy the Dwarf standing before her with such a dark, sullen look upon his usually good-humored countenance, was of purely unmixed wonderment. This was quickly followed by a glad hope. Surely she could come to no harm so long as Dandy was near and at liberty.

Under this impulse Ruth started to address him, but with a surly growl and an impatient fling of his hand, he turned away and joined the other men.

Bit by bit the hope that had sprung up in the maiden's heart died away as she watched the actions of the manikin. She saw that he was on terms of the closest intimacy with them, one and all, that he was treated as a comrade and equal by each of the five men, and that they bore good naturedly with his pompous airs. Then, for the first time, the suspicion struck her that Dandy was the principal agent in her abduction, acting thus out of revenge for her decided rejection of his suit.

This thought was not so ridiculous as it may appear on its face, at first glance. The dwarf was no common character, and there had always been a spice of mystery about him. No one appeared to know just who or what he was. He had apparently an unlimited command of money. He had performed deeds that seemed beyond the power of mortal man to accomplish alone and unaided. He held himself bound by no ordinary laws or usages. He had felt his rejection deeply, and, although at the time he had felt more sorrow than bitterness, it was hardly to be expected that one of his headstrong, lawless nature would quietly yield up the hopes he had cherished so long, without any attempt at revenge.

But before these reflections could become settled convictions, Ruth made a discovery that was even more disagreeable than the other. One other of the party was well known to her, though several years had passed since their last meeting.

That was when Randolph Livingstone was sold out under the sheriff's hammer, and forced to leave the pleasant home that had been theirs since the childhood of his grandfather, where his ancestors, his wife and all of his children save Ruth had died and were buried. Seth Mabry had come to her then and told her that he stood ready to purchase the plantation and all its belongings, if she would consent to become his wife. Randolph Livingstone answered for his child. Blood of his should never mix with that of old Mabry—a canting, lying, cheating Yankee money-lender and usurer. So the sale was completed, and old Mabry was the purchaser. Only a trifling sum remained for the broken planter, after all debts and claims were satisfied, and unable to remain near the old home, now that it had passed into such unworthy hands, the proud Virginian struck out into the wilderness and eventually became the proprietor of the Washington Arms.

From that day until now, Ruth had heard nothing of Seth Mabry, but the moment her eyes rested upon his bony frame and harsh-favored countenance, she felt that he was her captor, and not Dandy the Dwarf. And as this conviction gained ground, so the once banished hope that Dandy the Dwarf would stand her friend in this emergency, returned to her heart, and with an eager longing that she struggled hard to conceal from the eyes of her abductors, she watched for an opportunity of addressing the manikin, unheard, if not unobserved by any of the others.

The covert in which the outlaws had decided to spend the day, was a snug retreat, and seemingly calculated for just such purposes, though of a nature by no means uncommon in a swampy region.

It was situated nearly two miles from the main road, and in order to reach it without leaving any trail, the outlaws had left the highway at a point where a small stream crossed the road, following the bed of this until a dense thicket of canes was left behind them. By this time the bed of the stream had widened out into a shallow lagoon, the footing growing more insecure and unstable, until dangerous. Leaving the water, they kept on until quite a broad sheet of water lay before them, thickly sprinkled over with trees still standing, but dead, leafless and ragged topped.

Into this overflowed tract they struck, shortly coming in sight of an island containing several acres of firm earth, covered with a heavy growth of timber and shrubbery, particularly around the edges, the center being more open.

Here they felt safe from discovery unless by pure accident. The keenest nosed bounds could not follow their trail, while the island was not visible from the point where they last entered the water. Even if any one chanced to pass by the island, nothing could be discovered unless they fairly pressed through the dense, leafy screen.

Seth Mabry knew the value of the stake he was playing for, and would not lose it through

over-carelessness. He knew that this daring abduction would set the whole settlement in an uproar, but he could not resist the temptation when he saw the first move made so easy for him, though his business in that neighborhood was very different.

As already hinted, he belonged to the League, and was sent to Rushville with orders to silence forever one who had already struck the Family several heavy blows, and who was believed to be meditating still more serious ones. That person was James Carbry, the sheriff, and it was the rifle of Seth Mabry that discharged the fatal shot, under cover of the infuriated mob.

He it was who acted the eavesdropper when Ruth and Alabama Joe were conversing on the veranda of the Washington Arms, and was powerfully tempted to send a bullet through the heart of the unsuspecting swamp-ranger—whom he knew only too well for his own gratification—who had won the love he himself had so long coveted.

He and his men were the ones who set the three prisoners at liberty, in connection with Lee Ovelman, and then hung around the place with no settled object in view, until the presence of Ruth alone on the veranda overcame his natural prudence by the great temptation it offered.

Not until he was fairly clear of the village with his captive did he weigh the risks he was running. He knew that there were near fifty men scouring the swamps, aided by hounds, and lest he should encounter some of them, he determined to lie in hiding through the day, resuming his flight under cover of the friendly night.

It may have been that Seth Mabry wished to give Ruth a chance to become a little accustomed to the idea of being wholly in his power before fairly confronting her anger, but be that as it may, he took particular pains to keep out of her way, finally even leaving the island, or at least the open space in its center, as the maiden drew nearer, as he believed, with the intention of upbraiding him with his audacious outrage.

But nothing was further from Ruth's mind. She was seeking an interview with Dandy, instead, who also appeared desirous of avoiding her.

However, she finally succeeded in catching him apart from the rest, and in a low, guarded tone, asked him to follow her beyond earshot of the four outlaws who were taking their ease.

Dandy obeyed, but one less agitated than the maiden would have drawn an evil augury from his clouded brow and sullen, downcast looks. Ruth paused near the leafy screen at the upper end of the island, fearing to venture beyond lest the suspicions of the lounging outlaws should be aroused and thus induce them to follow and interrupt her conference with the manikin.

"Surely you are not my enemy, too, Dandy?" she began, speaking hurriedly, but fervently. "Though with, you are not of these wicked men who have stolen me away from my home and father. You have ever been treated kindly in our house. You have been like one of the family. You have broken our bread and eaten our salt. There was a painful cloud came between us, for which I have grieved long and deeply; but we parted friends, after all. You forgave the wrong I unthinkingly did you. Even if you still feel sore over it, surely you will not be so mean-spirited as to seek revenge upon a poor girl who has not a friend within call—unless you will be that friend—Dandy?"

Until his name was uttered at the conclusion, in an appealing tone, the dwarf listened with bowed head and downcast eyes, working a hole in the soft earth with the toe of his moccasin. But as Ruth ceased speaking, he raised his eyes until they met hers, and she shrunk back with a shiver and low exclamation of affright.

His ugly countenance was so distorted with strong emotions as to be fairly hideous. His goggle eyes were more protuberant than usual, and seemed on fire, so vividly did they glow, while his customarily musical voice sounded harsh and unnatural as the words rolled rapidly from his tongue in reply to her appeal.

"You say you have ever treated me like a friend, like one of the same family with yourself. The words sound nicely as they fall from your lips, but were I to tell the story, how different would be the tune! And yet my version would be the truest.

"For more than a year you have permitted me to follow you, obeying your slightest beck and nod like a well trained poodle-dog. For pay, I received an occasional kind word, or a touch from your soft little hand. You laughed at my speeches, but it was a laughter that said yes, rather than no. Time and again I told you I loved you—how I loved and worshiped you, could never be even shadowed forth in words. In my eyes you were an angel of light. I adored the very ground you trod upon. Often I told you as much, and you answered lightly, but never as though my hopes were hateful to you. I grew at last to speak of our marriage as a settled event, not very far distant in the future. Even then you did not repel or rebuke my presumption. Yes, I know now that it was almost incredible presumption in one of my face and

figure; but at that time I never saw myself with the eyes of other people—never until you awakened me.

"Stop!" he added, with an impatient wave of his hand as Ruth seemed about to speak. "I did not interrupt you; grant me the same consideration.

"For a whole year you fooled me to the top of my bent; allowed me to think of and treat you as one who was shortly to become my wife; treated me as a pure-minded maiden should only treat her destined husband. And then—when my suspicions were aroused—when you could no longer carry on your merry conceit—you tore off the mask and revealed the part you had been playing. Oh! it was a merry jest, and well befitted your father's daughter! It was only an ugly, hideous, foolish dwarf that you had been amusing yourself with. What right had one whom nature had made an outcast by placing her most repulsive brand upon, to have a heart that could be wrung by such a merry jest? What right had the miserable dwarf to ape the sentiments, the emotions, the hopes of a human creature? None at all!

"So you opened my ears with sharp, biting, scornful words, and to make sure that I could no longer mistake you, you led me to a mirror and kindly pointed out the contrast between your fair face and my hideous features.

"My eyes were opened then, and for the first time I saw myself as others saw me.

"I made no protest. I crept away like a dog that has been wounded unto death, to bear my pain in solitude. If I could have died then, like the dog, it would have been better for both you and me.

"But I could not make up my mind to die without seeing you once more, and asking your forgiveness for my mad presumption. I did see you—and him! Then I went away, meaning to put an end to the trouble and myself at the same time. But the devil wouldn't let me.

"I could only think of you and him—and remember the words I had heard pass between you when he took you in his arms and kissed you. From killing myself, I began to think of killing him; but before I could make up my mind to do that, the question was decided for me.

"A good and true friend of mine had cut the knot by stealing you away from him, and I joined him. He knew something of my story, and I told him the rest. He promised me my revenge—a glorious revenge!—though I must be patient and wait awhile—the lion must be satisfied first, then the faithful jackal will come in for his share."

"What do you mean?" painfully faltered Ruth, who was stunned and bewildered by this wild language.

"Years ago you scorned Seth Mabry, just as you lately scorned me. He, too, longs for revenge, and to satisfy that, he has stolen you from home. In a short time his revenge will be glutted—and when that time comes, he has promised by our friendship that he will turn you over to me, to deal with as I may see fit!" and with a low, mocking laugh, Dandy the Dwarf strode away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ONE CRIME LEADS TO ANOTHER.

LEE OVELMAN was strongly tempted to leap upon the fellow whose face wore an insulting smile of contemptuous defiance as he eyed the young lawyer over the leveled barrel of his revolver. This, though reason told him that a bullet would pierce his brain ere his hands could close upon the throat of the outlaw.

"Back, and take your seat ag'in," said Howe, in a less disagreeable voice, though he did not lower his weapon until Ovelman obeyed, which he did after a moment's hesitation. "That's more like it! I know I did rub you rather hard, but it was the shortest way I knowed to bring about a right understanding atween us. The way things stand, and considering the knowledge I've been lucky enough to pick up consarnin' the subject, we won't work no longer like master and slave, but as mates, shoulder to shoulder, or else we'll work on oppposite sides, as enemies. You can take your choice atween the two, boss."

"My choice will depend a good deal upon what you really know," quietly uttered Ovelman, keenly eying the ruffian as he spoke. "but still more upon what you are ready and willing to do. Any man who works in double harness with me, must keep his end of the double-tree even. But you spoke about papers—what papers?"

"The papers you was so anxious to git hold of just now that you came within a short foot of stepping into your grave—the papers that I took from Dawson's pocket, before we hung him on the drift-wood as though he'd floated down from above," said Howe, tapping his own breast as he spoke.

"You have read them, then?" demanded Ovelman.

"Sartin. I wanted to find out why you was takin' so much trouble to put old Craythorne—or Mayberry, I should say—out o' the world in a legal manner," chuckled the outlaw, shrewdly.

"Well, I don't know as it makes much difference, after all," said the young lawyer, thoughtfully. "The game was a bold one, and merited success, but you and yours took care to spoil it. I should have thought you a smarter man than that, Josh Howe. The work once done, with the knowledge you have gained of my reasons for wishing the old man put out of the way, it would have been a gold mine for you, well worth working."

"I've been thinking much the same myself, but the devil was ag'in' us from the fust step. I know I tried to do my work honest and faithful. Still, it ain't quite as bad as it might be. Neither Dawson nor the old man is dead yet, and one or both would pay a good price for the papers."

"Dawson would pay you through the muzzle of a revolver, if you showed your face near him, while the old man has fled, bag and baggage, daughter and all, no one knows whither. You would be wiser to look for a market nearer home."

"Whar—when did he go?" eagerly demanded Howe, paying no attention to the final hint of the other.

Ovelman gave a hasty sketch of what had occurred during the earlier part of the past night, to which the outlaw listened with intense interest. Though it had been the real cause of his being set free, it was all news to him.

"So!" he exclaimed as the young lawyer ended his explanation, "it's even better than I thought! Well let's settle about the papers, fust. How much will you give for them, and a honest promise that I will fergit everything I ever knowed about them? Make a fa'r bid, and then I'll tell you jest whar to look for old Mayberry and his daughter."

"Fifty dollars for the papers, and as much more if you can show me where the old man harbors," quickly responded Ovelman, the evil light deepening in his eyes as he spoke.

"Done! count out the money," tersely.

The young lawyer was no less prompt, and the exchange was made. Eagerly he opened the bill-book and glanced over the various papers it contained. They were what he expected, and so far as he knew, none were missing. Stowing them carefully away in his breast, for a closer perusal when time permitted, he turned to Howe.

"Now for the other half of your bargain. You have your money in advance; see that you earn it."

"You ain't fergot my tellin' you to look at that dug-out? Well, that canoe belongs to the old man—or did, up to daylight this morning. I had him under my eyes for two good minutes when I cornfiscated that floater, and if it hadn't been that the hounds was even then a-yelping on my trail, I would 'a' felt his brains with a bit o' lead, as the last chance of keepin' the orders of the boss. But I knowed it wouldn't be a very hard job to strike his trail and find him ag'in when the signs were more fav'able, and now, since you say the gal is 'long with him, I consait I kin place my finger on the very spot whar they're harboring at this identical moment."

"But you are not certain," mused Ovelman, like one who is hardly aware that he is speaking aloud.

"Almost; though the old man may have taken a skeer at the yelping of the hounds. But even so, and s'posing he has struck out into the swamp, I'd match myself to foller him through mud and water, let him twist and double all he pleases, with any other he that runs on two legs. Nur I wouldn't except a hound, perviding the trail was a watery one. No, mate, the Chitta Loosa swamp ain't big enough to hide him from my s'arching, pervided I'm fairly paid for my time, trouble and danger."

As he ceased speaking, the wiry, weasel-faced outlaw gazed keenly at his companion, as though to study the effect of his words. But Ovelman had his eyes bent upon the ground, where his forefinger was slowly and mechanically tracing a circle in the moist dirt. His face was pale, his features stern and hard-set, and to all appearance he had been too deeply absorbed in thought to have taken in the hidden meaning of the outlaw's last words.

Josh Howe eyed him closely for a few moments, then slowly nodded his head, while a grim satisfaction was expressed upon his face. He had caught the clew to the young lawyer's meditations, and was satisfied to await the result.

"You are satisfied that this Stephen Craythorne is an enemy to the League?" slowly asked Ovelman.

"The boss said so, and that is enough for me," was the prompt response of the outlaw.

"You know the laws of the family: death to all traitors, and to all others who attempt to do an injury to any member of the League."

"Yes; but I don't believe I could find the old man, unless I was well paid for it," said Josh Howe, with a low, meaning laugh.

"If a friend of the family was to bet you a goodly sum—how much, for instance?"

"Say five hundred dollars," quickly.

"No; that is unreasonable. But suppose the friend I speak of, was to bet one-half that sum

with you that the old man, Stephen Craythorne, would live four and twenty hours longer, what would you say the result would be?" slowly asked Ovelman.

"That the fri'nd you speak of would win my money, and sarve me right fer making such a low-down bet," was the cool response. "But if that fri'nd was to bet four hundred, at the very lowest mark, on his opinion, I think the chaintes are that he would lose his money, from being over bold and confident. The swamp air is powerful unhealthy this time o' year, specially to old men about Craythorne's age. With so much depending on his life, I feel sure that he would up and die, afore another sun."

"And the girl that is with him? She is naturally delicate. If she should die of grief for her father, it would not be so strange—or she might get lost in some of these convenient bogs—"

"Stop right whar you be, mate," abruptly interposed the outlaw, a darker shade of anger crossing his hard-favored features. "A man is a man, and the one who puts old Mayberry out of this world, will run the resk of his own life onless his first blow is sartin'; but when it comes to massacreeing a gal-woman, you kin count me out. I'm a hard aig, folks say, but I ain't so p'izen low-down as that. Just hint at sech a thing ag'in, and ef you was twice over a member of the Family, I'll tickle your lights with the p'int of my knife. No, I'll kill the old man, if you agree to pay my price, but not her."

"Nor have I even hinted at your doing so," said Ovelman, with apparent frankness, which, however, did not deceive his companion. "On the contrary, I would be the first one to hunt you down, in such a case. But can I depend on you, in regard to the old man?"

"I've told you my price. Pay me four hundred dollars, and I'll kill old Craythorne afore another sun rises," was the business-like response.

"I will make it the price you asked first if, in addition to settling him for good and all, you will take the girl prisoner," said Ovelman, a sudden light filling his eyes.

"Mind the hint I gave ye afore," warningly muttered the outlaw, suspiciously working his knife free in its sheath as his small eyes glittered.

"Don't be a fool, man! I tell you that girl is worth more to me than her weight in gold. I say take her captive; treat her as harshly as you please, so you do not really injure her. Give her a thorough good scare. Make her believe she is in the power of a merciless devil, if you can. Go into camp somewhere near the bank of the river. Talk rough, and let your actions correspond. Then, when she believes that all is lost, I will come down on you, fire a shot or two in the air, when you must fall down as if really killed. I will take her to the river, and wind up by a pleasant moonlight ride in the canoe."

"Play the hero and then marry her, eh? Wouldn't it suit you better for me to fall down dead in raal airnest? No, no, my covey! I'll take the gal and treat her as you say, but afore thar's any shootin' done I'll make sure that you don't have more'n one pistol, and it loaded with nothing more than powder and a paper wad."

"Be that as you like, but upon my honor, I had not thought of turning the farce into a tragedy."

"The less said about honor the better, I reckon," curtly retorted Howe. "But about the pay: I don't reckon you got so much money with ye?"

"Certainly not; but I can give you a note—"

"Write what I say, and I'll run the resk."

In default of any more suitable paper, Ovelman wrote the words dictated to him upon one of the documents which had been taken from Zenas Dawson. Howe enumerated the services to be rendered, giving names in full, together with the consideration, to which he caused the young lawyer to sign his name in extended form.

"That will answer," he said, with a grim chuckle, as he slowly read over each word to make sure that nothing of importance was omitted. "I don't reckon you'll go back on your word, long's I have this dockymnt to show for my money."

Nor was Ovelman one whit the less satisfied, since he had firmly resolved that neither Howe nor the bond of blood should ever leave that swamp. Once the foul work was done, he could easily contrive to silence the tool, once for all.

"Well, the fust thing is to find out whether the old man has left his nest or not. Keep behind me and step light. If he once gets wind of what we're after I wouldn't give much for either your hide or my own," said the outlaw, arising.

"Will the canoes be safe where they are? Hadn't we better take them a ways up the bayou and hide them?"

"No; whoever kin see them whar they be 'll most likely be on the water in boats of thar own," responded Howe, leading the way into the swamp.

Scarcely had the faint echoes of their footsteps died away when a strange occurrence took place in the water near the two canoes. A mass of moss and weeds were uplifted from the water on the head of a human being of gigantic mold!

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MADMAN'S CUNNING.

THIS aquatic eavesdropper was none other than the brain-affected giant, Stephen Craythorne.

From the moment that Cherokee Dan called his dogs off from the fresh trail and the man-hunters, recrossing the bayou, passed away beyond sight and hearing, the mind of the giant was troubled only with one thought: the sudden and mysterious disappearance of his canoe.

Without a word to his daughter, he took his rifle and returned to the edge of the bayou. He did not stoop to search for a trail, for the soft soil around had been trampled almost into mire by the foot-steps of the man-hunters while deliberating what course they should next pursue. He was not so mad but what he could reason coherently, and was only a short time in reaching the truth.

The hounds and men had been hunting some human game; so much he had learned from their loud and animated speech. The trail had led them down the bayou, and was lost a few rods above where the canoe had been stolen. This must have been taken by the fugitive to expedite his flight, and of course he would not have dared to venture up the bayou in the very teeth of his enemies, since their torches would have led to immediate discovery. Beyond a doubt he had fled down-stream in the dug-out.

As soon as he reached this conclusion, Stephen Craythorne started down the bank of the bayou, closely inspecting every spot where a canoe could possibly be hidden, and searching for a trail to make sure that the thief had not landed, but the river side was reached without his making any discovery. Crossing the bayou, by swimming, he searched the other side in a similar painstaking manner, finally returning to the river just in time to catch a glimpse of Lee Ovelman as that worthy turned the bend in the river above, paddling down-stream in the canoe of Alabama Joe.

Believing the dug-out was the one stolen from him, Craythorne crouched down under cover and prepared his rifle for use. The weapon was just rising to a level, when Josh Howe hailed the young lawyer and shot out in his canoe from the little island.

The madman lowered his rifle, his interest and curiosity excited as Ovelman sheered toward his covert, apparently afraid of the other boatman.

The reader knows what followed: how the two men landed in company and seated themselves upon the river bank amid the scanty fringe of bushes and vines.

Craythorne recognized them both as men who had played a prominent part in his trial of the preceding day, and with a madman's cunning suspicion, he resolved to eavesdrop them, though the natural difficulties in the way would have daunted any man in his sober senses.

There was no cover upon land sufficient to shelter a man of his size within ear-shot of the plotters, save that in which they themselves were ensconced. But the madman was equal to the occasion.

Cautiously retreating up the bayou, he crossed it, and only pausing to collect a quantity of long moss and dead swamp grass, he again entered the water, and masking his head and shoulders, stole cautiously down around the point, finally pausing close to the bank beneath the conspirators, in the shadow cast by an overhanging bush, sinking so low in the water that the moss and grass rested upon the surface, as though arrested in its floating by the bush that touched the water.

From this position he overheard nearly every word that was spoken by the two men sitting upon the bank above his head, and had not the nature of his espial necessitated his leaving his fire-arms behind him, the madman would have arisen from his ambush and put the matter to the test then and there.

Waiting until assured that the conspirators had fairly started upon their journey of exploration, the madman noiselessly arose from the water, and still bearing the dripping mask of moss and grass upon his head, scaled the bank and peered around in search of his enemies. He discovered them just as they were disappearing amid the shadows of the swamp, a hundred yards away, and satisfied that they would not return before he was ready for them, he retreated down the bank, obliterating all trace of his passage as he went. Casting the mask that had stood him in such good stead, far out into the current, Craythorne entered his own canoe, taking the other in tow, and passed from the river around into the bayou, hiding both crafts in the bushes that lined the further bank, then concealing the paddles in another place. This done to his satisfaction, he swam over the lagoon and resumed his weapons and ammunition, after which he stole up the bank and crept along in search of the trail left by Ovelman and Josh Howe.

This was readily found, since they had not deemed it necessary to display much caution as yet, nothing being further from their minds than what really occurred: their being trailed by the man for whom they were searching. Both Howe and Ovelman believed the old man to be at least half crazy, and his stubborn, immovable silence during the time occupied by his trial for life, had been interpreted by them as a sort of imbecile stupor caused by personal fear. Surely there was nothing to dread from the cunning of such an insensate mass of flesh! Their principal fear was that he had taken alarm at the hounds of the man-hunters, and fled precipitately into the deeper recesses of the swamp.

Under this misapprehension, Josh Howe led the way in an almost direct line to the huge old tree whose capacious interior he knew was a favorite resort of the old man, when one of his "dark spells" came over him. This much he had learned while preparing to strike the double blow, which had failed so signally.

According to instructions, Lee Ovelman kept a few yards in the rear of the weasel-faced outlaw as they drew nearer to the hollow tree. In case Stephen Craythorne should make his appearance, Howe was to shoot him down at once, while Ovelman was to lie *perdu*, unless his aid should be really essential to the subjugation of the giant, or to save the life of his comrade in crime. When the man should be disposed of, Howe was to secure the maiden, and then the theatrical *coup* was to be made by the young lawyer, whenever he deemed his appearance would have the most telling effect.

Making a sign for Ovelman to place himself in ambush, Howe began slowly circling around the hollow tree at about fifty yards' distance, keeping himself covered with a skill that was fairly marvelous, and which proved him a born scout.

Unfortunately for himself, Howe directed the most of his attention toward the tree and the bushes which surrounded its base, else he might have discovered the crouching form of the madman, since he passed within a dozen yards of his covert.

Keenly as he watched, nothing rewarded his scout. Not a sound came from the hollow tree to indicate its being still occupied, and when the outlaw once more joined his companion, he was almost convinced that their game had taken to flight.

"I'll soon find out," he muttered, doggedly. "Do you hunker down in this bush and keep me kivered. If you see any need of it, burn powder, but mind you don't make any mistake in picking out your target, for it'll need the two of us to handle the old man, once he gits his back up."

The young lawyer was nothing loth to accept this division of labor, since it entailed neither trouble nor danger on his part. Settling down as directed, he cocked a revolver and rested its barrel in a crotch of the bush.

First assuring himself that his weapons were in working order and ready to his hand, Howe noiselessly crept toward the hollow tree, keeping on the side opposite to the opening in the trunk.

He reached the fringe of bushes without anything occurring to arouse his suspicions, and then paused for a few moments, all his senses upon the alert. Not a sound could he hear, save the faint sighing of the breeze through the tree-tops, and more firmly than ever did he believe that the place was deserted.

Still, he was too thorough a scout to make any rash movement, and gently tried to force his way through the bushes; but, as he did so, a dried branch snapped sharply, and pressing close against the tree-trunk, he drew a pistol, his thumb upon the hammer, though he dared not cock it then, lest the sharp double click should still further betray him, for just then he heard a sound of rustling come from the interior.

With a curious thrill of joy and relief, he heard the soft, sad voice of Honor Craythorne utter:

"Father, is that you? Are you here?"

From his covert Lee Ovelman beheld a light form pass through the bushes, and recognized the pale, sorrowful countenance of Honor Craythorne as she gazed around her, seeking in vain for her father, whose approach she believed had caused the slight noise that had aroused her from her thoughts.

Though so near the maiden, Howe could neither see nor be seen by her, though his keen ears informed him of her every movement. He heard her faint sigh of disappointment as her yearning gaze met with no reward, and a few moments later he knew that she had re-entered the hollow tree.

Satisfied now that she was alone, he silently beat a retreat and rejoined the young lawyer. They both sat down beneath the bushes, lest Honor should again venture forth to look for her father.

"The old man may be miles away from this, or he may be close to hand," said the weasel-faced outlaw, thoughtfully. "Ef he's fur off we kin take the gal an' lay fer him. He won't stay away all the time. Ef he's close by, one

yelp from his gal's lips would bring him down onto us like a she-catamount."

The young lawyer shrugged his shoulders as though he little relished this picture. Howe smiled, venomously.

"Thar's more ways than one to skin a cat. Listen: I'll crawl over thar ag'in, and plunging in, take the gal captive, most like afore she kin make a sound. But if she do yell and bring the old man down, it's queer ef we two cain't handle him. Ef she don't, I'll tie her eyes, and then you kin come in. When we git ready, I'll let her squeal a bit, to tole the old man into the trap. As he comes up, which he's bound to do, sooner or later, ef we keep the music going at odd spells, why we'll open on him, and make a riddler of his karkidge. Then you kin slip off, and I'll take keer of the gal ontel you want to play theayter, as we agreed on afore. That's my plan; what think?"

"That no better one could be devised were we to cogitate from now till doomsday. Do your part, and I'll keep my end up, never fear," the young lawyer heartily exclaimed.

With a chuckle of self-admiration, the outlaw arose and glided toward the hollow tree.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SENT ADRIFT.

STEPHEN CRAYTHORNE was a deeply interested witness of all this maneuvering on the part of the weasel-faced outlaw. While making his circuit of the hollow tree in the endeavor to discover whether or no it was still occupied by the game he sought, Josh Howe passed so close to the clump of bushes in which the cunning madman had taken up his position, that two quick leaps would have brought them together. The temptation was strong, but Craythorne resisted it in hopes of a chance to catch both of his enemies at one stroke.

He saw Howe draw near the tree, and a moment later he heard the voice of his daughter calling to him, and beheld her part the bushes to glance slowly around in quest of her parent.

Lucky it was for the outlaw that he did not act upon his first impulse, for Stephen Craythorne anticipated some such move the moment Honor made her appearance. His long rifle was half-poised, in readiness for a quick shot, in case the outlaw should make any attempt to secure the maiden; but the precaution was needless.

The moment he saw Josh Howe begin his retreat, for the purpose of consulting with Lee Ovelman, the madman put into execution a bold and daring plan that had flashed across his busy brain while watching the enemy.

The better to understand the nature of this plan and action, the situation of the different parties engaged, may be indicated thus: The hollow tree had its opening on the north side. Ovelman and Howe were hidden directly south of the tree, while the old man was lying nearly due east. For ten feet in depth around the base of the huge tree, the vine-laced bushes grew thickly, but besides these, there was little cover to be found within two score yards upon any side. Beyond that limit, the undergrowth afforded fair shelter.

As soon as he saw Josh Howe fairly beating a retreat, Stephen Craythorne prostrated himself and backed rapidly away from the bushes that had thus far sheltered him, keeping them between himself and the enemy until fairly beyond eyesight. Then he rapidly passed around to the north side of the tree until that and the surrounding bushes served to cover his movements. Arising, he strode swiftly forward, parting the leafy screen and entering the hollow shell.

Fortunately Honor was pretty well habituated to eccentric movements and actions on the part of her father, and made no outcry at this abrupt appearance so soon after her vain search and unanswered calling.

"Go up there and lie still," the giant uttered in a sharp, peremptory whisper, pointing above his head to the rude scaffolding. "For your life don't make a sound—there are evil men close at hand who are thirsting for my blood. Go—be quick!"

Poor Honor had well learned the lesson of unquestioning obedience, and though her face turned still more pale, while her limbs trembled so violently as to be hardly able to perform their office, she did as ordered, without a word.

Only waiting to see her safely upon the scaffolding, the giant madman emerged from the tree and passing partly around the trunk, peered keenly through the bushes. This was just as Josh Howe parted from his companion, as already detailed.

Affected though his brain undoubtedly was, the giant instantly suspected the purpose of the outlaw, and silently withdrew into the tree, taking up his position close to one side of the entrance. He stood his rifle close by, but did not draw any other weapon.

Believing as he did that Honor Craythorne was the sole occupant of the hollow tree, the outlaw cared but little whether his advance was heard or not. Even should the maiden discover him, any attempt at flight could be easily frustrated, and her screams could do no more than

draw the giant to the spot, which was precisely what he most desired. After taking the same precautions, and receiving the same evidence, the most cunning and skillful scout in existence would probably have acted just as he did.

Reaching the bushes, the outlaw parted them and thrust his head and shoulders into the opening. It was not fear that caused him to pause thus, but by comparison the interior was very dark, and he preferred not to give the maiden a chance to rush past him and out into the swamp.

Though a perfectly natural one, this action placed him wholly in the power of the steel-muscled giant, whose long, bony fingers met and interlaced around his throat with a force that would have throttled a grizzly bear. Not a sound came from the lips of the outlaw, though he fully realized his peril and did his best to free himself. He even succeeded in drawing his knife, but before he could make use of it, Craythorne whirled him swiftly over upon his back and knelt upon both his arms.

Now that the evil passions of the madman were fairly awakened, it may well be doubted whether that fierce, deadly gripe would have relaxed until the outlaw was strangled beyond recovery, but Honor, rendered bold by the terrible sight, descended and begged her father not to stain his soul with murder. Nor did her interference come any too soon. Already the outlaw was insensible and turning black in the face.

"Bring the rope and bind his hands and feet," said Craythorne, releasing his captive as he remembered that only half his work was done. "Do it quickly and well. Our lives may depend on it."

The habit of implicit obedience gave Honor the strength and address necessary for carrying out these orders, and procuring the bed-cord which had been used in securing the bundle brought with them in the canoe, she set to work as directed.

Craythorne did not wait to see the bands applied, but satisfied that the outlaw was beyond giving any more trouble, he took up his rifle and left the tree, though still keeping within the line of bushes.

Guided by the knowledge previously gained, he soon discovered the face of Lee Ovelman peering through the bushes beyond, anxiously awaiting for the signal that should tell him that Howe had succeeded in the first part of their nefarious plot.

Although Craythorne, of course, was ignorant of the agreement made between the two men, the plan which he adopted in order to lure Ovelman within reach could not have been bettered, since it was exactly what the young lawyer had been looking for.

First uttering a low, yet clear whistle to attract the enemy's attention, Craythorne thrust one hand through the bushes and made a quick beckoning sign, then grasped his rifle in readiness for use in case the man should be alarmed and betake himself to flight.

But this precaution was unnecessary. Expecting a summons from Howe, the young lawyer was too deeply excited to notice the difference in the size of the beckoning hand from that of the outlaw's, and leaving his cover, he ran toward the tree.

Craythorne did not wait for him to pass through the bushes, but resigning his rifle, sprung upon his enemy the moment he came within reach, bearing him to the ground like a child, and falling upon him with a force that drove the breath completely out of his body. Arising and grasping him by the throat, the madman dragged his second captive into the hollow tree, applying the bonds upon his limbs with his own hands, and fitting gags between their jaws.

While thus occupied, the sight of a paper protruding from the breast of Josh Howe, reminded the madman of the words he had heard while hidden in the river, and when his prisoners were fairly bound and gagged, he emptied their pockets of everything, bidding Honor take them in charge and keep them safely, though little guessing how closely those documents concerned him.

Whether he was following out a plan already decided upon in all its details, or whether it was a sudden fancy that just entered his disordered brain, will never be known, but certainly the giant lost no time in idle thought. Stooping, he took one prisoner under each arm, and bearing them with as much apparent ease as a child does its twin dolls, passed through the bushes and down to the edge of the bayou, where he dropped them upon the ground and gazed keenly around him. A black frown came upon his brow as he caught sight of Honor, who had ventured to follow him, and he sternly bade her return to the tree.

Terrified, she silently obeyed, though fearing the worst from that stern, fixed frown.

Leaving his prisoners where he had dropped them, Craythorne passed up the bayou until he found what he was looking for: the dead and seasoned trunk of a small tree that was almost denuded of branches. Breaking off the few that remained, he rolled the log into the water and floated it down opposite his prisoners.

Taking them down one after the other, he removed the cords which confined their feet, placing them astride upon the log, some two yards apart and facing each other, after which he tightly bound the ankles of each man, then fixing them immovably in place, so far as the lower portion of their bodies was concerned.

By this time the senses of both Howe and Ovelman had fully returned, but their tongues were tied, and the madman paid no attention to the mute appeals for mercy made through their eyes.

Using a flexible length of grapevine when his supply of cord was exhausted, the giant fastened one end to the butt of the log, bringing the vine up and around Ovelman's neck, then to Howe, whose throat was encircled in a like manner, after which the vine was secured to the log beyond him. By this arrangement the men were obliged to retain a painfully upright position or else run the risk of choking each other, while the least deviation to either side would inevitably overturn the log, when they must perish miserably by strangulation.

With a low, mocking laugh the madman pushed the log with its helpless freight out into the deeper water. But it was not his intention to leave them there, and emerging from the water he hastened down to a point opposite where he had left the two canoes. Swimming across the bayou, he entered his own boat, and paddling up-stream, took the log in tow, pulling steadily down toward the river, guarding against overturning the float.

He did not pause when the mouth of the bayou was reached, but continued on until fairly out in the current of the river. Assuring himself that the grapevine was still secure, he turned the log and its living freight loose, then paddled back to the shore, his wild, maniacal laughter ringing in the ears of the doomed men like the knell of death.

Gloatingly he watched the log drift away down the current, but not even his mad cunning could begin to realize the full extent of the punishment he was inflicting upon his enemies. More exquisite tortures were never invented. Each moment was a living death. Black though their sins may have been, they could not have deserved a more horrible punishment than this!

CHAPTER XXIX.

GALUSHA SHOWS HIS HAND.

THE news brought by Tom Clark from the village, fell like a thunderbolt among the party of man-hunters. Taken collectively, they would have been far less shocked had the same misfortune befallen any other than Ruth Livingstone, who was dearly beloved by, and a general favorite with, both old and young.

For a few moments Alabama Joe stood like one who had suddenly been petrified, and it seemed as though this fresh blow, added to all that he had already undergone, would prove to be more than he could bear up under. But like a true thoroughbred, he was game to the core, and quickly rallying, answered their fresh demand upon his severely tasked powers by action, not speech.

Though the first to start, Alabama Joe was not allowed to make the six-mile race alone.

Doctor Brady remained beside his patient, and insisted upon Tom Clark's standing by him, to aid in making the litter for the purpose of conveying Zenas Dawson to the village. Lee Ovelman stole away in Alabama Joe's dug-out.

These were the only exceptions, though by no means all of those starting for the village did so with the stern resolution that animated the breast of the swamp-ranger. A few attempted to keep pace with him, and met with more or less success for a few minutes, but by the time one-half the distance was covered, Alabama Joe was out of sight and sound of his nearest competitor.

There were two men in the party that might have made a much better showing than they did, if so inclined. One was Cherokee Dan, the man-hunter. Like the majority of half-bloods, he was constitutionally lazy, and slow of movement unless his cupidity or evil passions were aroused. The second was the man who bore the queer cognomen of Galusha Evergreen.

Although there has been no occasion to mention his name, Galusha had been a member of the man-hunting party from the moment that Alabama Joe called upon the settlers to follow him to the old cabin where Zenas Dawson was lying. Though never in the lead, neither did he bring up the rear, but ever formed one of that respectable portion, the center, and for that reason, perhaps, his presence had been ignored by all.

Just now, he appeared deeply interested in Cherokee Dan and his hounds, regulating his pace by that of the half-blood, and "doing the agreeable" to the best of his abilities. The man-hunter met his advances cordially, scenting fire-water if not something more substantial, and by the time the village was reached, it was agreed between them that Galusha Evergreen should have the first claim upon the services of Dan and his hounds, provided he would pay the same price that might be offered by those interested

more nearly in the fate of Ruth Livingstone. This, in case the dogs could be made of use in searching for the missing maiden.

To make sure that his new ally would not be seduced from his bargain, Galusha Evergreen left the half-breed under cover outside of the village while he entered and procured a quart flask of whisky, hastening his return to the rendezvous.

Evergreen made his approaches cautiously and circuitously, taking care not to divulge his purpose until he was fully satisfied that Cherokee Dan cared little what might be the nature of the game he hunted, provided he was well paid for his time, trouble and the risk he run. But it is not necessary to follow the cautious speculator step by step through these preliminaries since their niceties were wholly thrown away upon the unscrupulous half-blood.

"Then you think you can find the man, if I show you the direction he took, even if he started by canoe?" asked Evergreen, earnestly.

"If he is alive and above ground—yes," was the positive reply. "He could not go on paddling forever. He must land somewhere, for rest or to eat. I can find him, with my dogs, if the pay is enough to make it worth my while."

"Well, then—but remember that all this is a secret between you and me—the man I wish you to find, is the big fellow called Stephen Craythorne."

Not a muscle of the man-hunter's face changed save that his eyelids slightly lowered, as if to hide the quick glow that filled the snake-like orbs.

"The finding may not be so hard, but you want more'n that, if I don't mistake. You wouldn't want to pay my price, only to look at the man, big as he is. Ain't I right?"

"Yes. I want the aid of yourself and hounds not only in finding, but in taking the old man prisoner—to arrest him as an escaped criminal."

"He was bound and helpless, not so long since, right here. Why didn't you claim him then?"

"Because, a reward that would satisfy two men for their trouble and risk, would not go far among the crowd that arrested him then," laughed Galusha.

This was the real key to his strange anxiety and actions of the past day. He knew that if the truth was divulged, a score or more claimants for a share in the blood-money would spring up, if indeed he was not entirely excluded. Believing he himself was the only one that knew the facts of the case, he did all he could to secure Craythorne's release, running no slight risk, as the reader has seen, not only at the trial, but subsequently, when he paid the giant a visit at his own home.

The story he told there, was wholly without foundation. The testimony of Alabama Joe had removed even the shadow of suspicion from the giant, and though a mob of such men is a terribly dangerous element, it is only so in the case of those who are believed to deserve punishment.

Evergreen's reasons for carrying such a tale, may readily be divined. He wished to frighten the giant into fleeing down the river, and having thus, apparently, proven his own friendship, intended to bear him company, watching for a favorable opportunity to take him prisoner.

As has been noted, this plausible plan failed, and now the detective—for such he really was—had resolved to pursue a bolder course.

"That will be a risky job," uttered the man-hunter, slowly. "The big man is cunning, and will not easily be caught napping. He will fight hard, and there will be broken bones, if no worse. The pay should be large for such work as that."

"We will be two to one, not counting the dogs," responded Evergreen. "I will be running the same risk as yourself, so you cannot complain. Can you read?" he asked, abruptly.

"No," was the terse response, and the eyelids once more drooped slightly.

The detective thrust one hand into his bosom, but then withdrew it, empty.

"I was going to show you the hand-bill describing the man and offering a reward for his apprehension, but I can tell you, just as well."

"A dozen years ago, more or less, this man, now called Stephen Craythorne, lived in one of the big towns, East. One day it happened that, in a quarrel with another man, he killed him, then took his little daughter—the same that is living with him now, and fled. He was pursued, but made his escape. There was a reward offered for his arrest, and one of the hand-bills came into my possession. I, like many another officer, hunted for the fugitive, but he was cunning enough to throw us all off the scent, and finally nearly everybody forgot all about the matter."

"I came South, and by mere chance hit upon the trail I had lost years before. I followed it up, and finally found my man, but before I could arrest him, this strange affair of Dawson interfered, and my game was blocked for the time. But if you will help me, I will finger that money yet."

"It should be a good large sum, for you to run so much risk, and waste so much time."

"Five hundred dollars is not to be sneezed at," said Evergreen, with a quick side glance at the half-blood, which the latter gave no sign of

having observed. "I did hope to earn it all myself, but as I don't care about tackling the old man alone, I will share equally with you, if you help me arrest and convey him to the nearest boat landing on the Mississippi."

"That is, you agree to give me one half of the reward? Well, of course you will not object to put that on paper."

"I will pay you the money down, the minute we set foot on board a steamboat."

"I'd rather have the paper; not that I think you would try to cheat me, for that would not be healthy, but it looks more like business."

Galusha Evergreen looked as though this arrangement was far from suiting him, but as he could give no plausible excuse for refusing, he drew forth his note-book and pencil.

"You needn't mind about putting down the figures," quietly added the man-hunter. "Just say that, as pay for services rendered in arresting a man, you agree to pay me one-half the reward placed upon his head. Put it down that way, because I owe some money around here, and if they knew how much pay I got, they would dreen me of every dollar."

"But no one need see the paper, for I mean to pay you your half, the moment we strike the steamboat with the prisoner," urged the detective.

"So you said before," was the cold response. "But put it my way or not at all. I've been cheated too often to trust a gentleman like you, even, and as I can't read myself, I mean to show that paper to a friend that can, and he has too long a tongue for me to trust with the real price I am to get."

"But Craythorne has too many friends around here—he would be rescued, even after we had captured him," impatiently uttered the detective.

"Leave a place open for the name, and you can write that after my friend has seen that the rest is all right. I'll hand the paper over to you just as soon as you pay me the money. I don't care about risking my life in those things that run by hot water. We'll part at the landing."

Finding that the half-blood had a plausible answer for his every objection, Galusha Evergreen filled out the agreement as demanded. Cherokee Dan took the paper, and bidding the other await his return, entered the village, as though to lay the document before the friend he had spoken of.

It may be stated here that he *was* able to read, and that he had the amount stated as he did, because he felt sure that the detective was trying to deceive him—that the reward was much higher than stated. Armed with the written promise to divide, he intended to bear Galusha and the prisoner company until he learned the whole truth and received his just dues.

Returning to where he had left the detective, he said that the paper was all right, and after the name was inserted, he told Evergreen of the discovery he had made that morning; that before sunset he could take him to the hiding-place of Stephen Craythorne and his daughter.

CHAPTER XXX.

DANDY MAKES AMENDS.

DANDY the Dwarf turned away from the maiden with a low, mocking laugh, like one thoroughly satisfied with a foretaste of revenge, leaving poor Ruth dazed and bewildered under this shattering of her last faint hope. It was a terrible blow, and for a time she sunk beneath it.

Even Dandy appeared not to have escaped from the interview entirely unscathed. His florid face was several shades lighter than usual, and the lines between his protuberant eyes were deeper and closer together. Instead of joining the four men who were now engaged in playing cards for small stakes, the manikin dropped to the ground several rods away, sitting with elbows upon knees and chin supported by his palms as he gazed into vacancy.

If his wish was for solitude and self-communion, Dandy was fated to disappointment, for a few seconds later the bushes parted to admit the passage of Seth Mabry, who passed before the dwarf, then sat down with the heavy lurch of one who, if not absolutely drunk, had been drinking freely.

"Dandy, my lad, you're a jewel of the very first water, and I'm proud of your acquaintance," were his first words, emphasized by a thump of his bony hand upon the bowed back of the dwarf. "But less than an hour ago, I thought I would have to tickle your ribs with a sharp knife, or else plant you head-foremost in one of the bogs that are so plentiful in this delicious country. And that would pain me deeply, Dandy—that would tear my heart into fiddle-strings, and cause my eyes to shed more tears than could a regiment of crocodiles. For if there is one beauty in this world that I really love, it is yourself, Dandy—always barring the ladies; mind, we leave them out of the question."

A double hiccough cut short the maudlin speech of the drunken ruffian and brought tears to his eyes. He was one of those naturally taciturn persons whose tongue is loosened by

liquor, and whose worst passions are gradually stirred up by the same influence, steadily growing more and more inflamed until, all at once, the brain is stilled and the toper falls abruptly into a state of coma, rather than sleep.

Unfortunately Dandy was ignorant of this fact, or it is possible that he might have averted what followed. As it was, his words only helped to develop the brutal instincts of the ruffian.

"Of course I am your friend, Mabry, though one small in size. But what have I done that you should think of killing me? for that's what your words amount to."

"It was what you might have done, Dandy. You had but a precious slender hold upon life when I saw you stealing away with my lady, yonder. Twice my finger was on trigger, while the bead covered your brain-pan, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to fire—perhaps because I didn't want to alarm the girl."

"That would have been wasting lead on a friend, that had much better be kept for your enemies," was the quiet response of the manikin. "But what caused you to change your opinion of me, so suddenly? That is not your habit."

"See to what depths of infamy love and jealousy will bring an honest gentleman!" and Mabry shook his head from side to side with drunken solemnity. "The venturesome wretch who would have dared even to hint at the words spy and eavesdropper in connection with my name, should have died the death! But now—how low hath the mighty fallen!"

"In every-day talk, you mean to say that you suspected me of treachery, and so listened to my interview with the girl?" uttered Dandy.

Mabry nodded, another heaving hiccup straining in his throat the words he would have spoken.

"Well, seeing that it was you, one of my best friends, I can overlook the doubt, now that it is past; but if I had suspected such a thing, there would have been powder burned and lead swallowed, sure enough."

"You came out of the fiery ordeal like gold from the crucible, thrice refined, Dandy. You cut the proud, high-headed girl to the quick, lad, but it will do her good."

"Revenge is sweet," muttered the dwarf, his goggle eyes glowing vividly. "It was her turn last night, and mine to-day. You remember your promise?"

"Yes; but you must wait until I am tired of her. Do you know, Dandy, I think that this would be a fine opportunity for me to begin breaking her in. You have opened the subject. I will strike while the iron is hot—"

"Better wait until at the end of your journey, man," said the dwarf, his voice sounding strained and unusually harsh.

"Keep your advice until it is called for. I allow no man to interfere in matters that concern me," said Mabry, with a sudden assumption of drunken dignity, as he arose to his feet and walked somewhat unsteadily toward the spot where Ruth Livingstone was sitting, her face buried in her hands.

Dandy arose likewise, and had Seth Mabry not been so far gone in liquor, he would have known that his life was in danger. Villain though he had confessed himself, the dwarf at that moment bore an expression upon his ugly face that said he stood ready to sacrifice his "friend" in defense of the captive maiden.

But the drunkard was past noticing this, or of heeding anything save his own bestial passions, and paid no further attention to the dwarf, who, nevertheless, followed close at his heels.

The natural clearing which composed the central portion of the swamp island, and which had been selected by the outlaws to harbor in during the day, was shaped somewhat like an egg, and about forty yards at its extreme length. Upon all sides was a stiff fringe of vine-covered bushes and small trees. The central portion was almost entirely free from undergrowth, though there were a few scattering trees.

The four card-players were seated at the larger end of the ovate clearing, near where the horses were tethered, while Ruth was seated at the other extremity, nearly two score yards away.

She arose to her feet as she heard the dull, unsteady footsteps of Seth Mabry, but the air of cold dignity which she essayed to assume, was a woeful failure. She read her terrible peril in the glowing, inflamed eyes of the outlaw, nor did the presence of Dandy the Dwarf tend to lessen her apprehensions. Those cruel, insulting words were still ringing in her ears.

Seth Mabry, brutal and cruel at the best, was not one to mince matters, or to beat around the bush long when in his cups as now. What he said, can find no record in these pages. Enough that what Dandy contented himself with hinting at, was by him uttered outright, and in a manner that left no room for doubt. But the ruffian was not satisfied with words alone, and suddenly clasped the trembling maiden in his arms. Though his foul breath scorched her cheek, his hot lips were never suffered to pollute hers.

With a sure, swift stroke, Dandy the Dwarf drove the long and broad blade of his bowie knife half-way to the hilt in the outlaw's neck, severing the spinal cord and causing instant death.

Not even a groan escaped the insulter's lips, so sure and deadly was the blow of the manikin, but as he fell heavily forward, the weight of his lifeless body carried Ruth backward, a piercing shriek of terror parting her lips and startling the gamblers from their cards.

They saw their leader fall—saw the blood-dripping knife in the gory hands of the dwarf—and leaped to their feet with shouts of angry surprise.

But Dandy did not quail before the heavy odds. He made a couple of swift leaps to one side, to guard against the girl for whom he was daring so much, being struck by a stray bullet, and then opened fire upon the outlaws with a revolver.

His skill with these weapons had made him noted even among a people who considered good marksmanship an important part of their education, and now he was shooting for the highest stake that man can contend for.

Two shots—and as many men went down before his fatal aim, almost before they could realize the fact that their lives were at stake. The dwarf fired a third shot before either of the survivors could prepare their weapons, but the bullet was buried in the soft earth a few yards before him, as his foot slipped upon a rotten, slime-covered stick, causing him to fall headlong.

Before he could arise the bullets were hissing around him as the two outlaws, bold and desperate fellows both, advanced to close quarters at a run.

Dandy knew that he was hit, and hit hard, for a dizzy sickness assailed him as he strove to arise, but with a desperate effort he fought against the faintness, and rising to his knees, discharged his pistol twice more.

One of the men paused, turned half-way around, then flung out his arms and fell forward upon his face, a bullet through his heart. But the other still came on, and rising into the air as he neared the almost blind dwarf, struck him with both feet a terrible blow upon the shoulders.

Active as a cat, the outlaw recovered himself and cocked his pistol to deliver the finishing shot at the writhing body of the dwarf. But ere he had fairly regained his balance a bullet from behind found his life.

Ruth fired this shot with a pistol which she hurriedly snatched from Seth Mabry's side, and providence guided the bullet, for the poor girl was too terribly agitated to think of taking aim.

She forgot the cruel words that Dandy had spoken to her—forgot all save their long friendship and the fact that he had fallen while striving to protect her from insult and outrage. She knelt beside him, wiping the blood and dirt tenderly, tearfully from his face. She brought water from the swamp in the hat of one of the dead outlaws, and dashed it into his face. And when his eyes opened, his lips quivering as a faint smile flickered around them, the tears fell from her eyes in a gentle rain.

"Don't—it hurts me," the Dwarf said, faintly. "I'm not worth—a tear—from your eyes. Look—bottle—I must speak—"

Faint and indistinct as the last words were, Ruth caught and comprehended their meaning, and gently lowering his head from her lap, she felt in the pockets of one after another of the dead outlaws, until she found a partially filled flask of liquor. It was a terrible task, handling those ghastly bodies, but she was equal to the emergency.

Dandy swallowed the fiery liquor eagerly, and in a few moments began to feel its effects. He spoke rapidly, as though conscious that only a few minutes of life remained for him. He told Ruth that his sole purpose in joining Seth Mabry was to rescue her. When he met the party, it was already clear of the village, and he knew that even if he raised the alarm, there were no men at hand to lend him aid. A known and trusted member and spy of the league, he found it an easy matter to deceive Mabry.

"I knew he was watching us, when I spoke those bad words. It was like tearing out my heart, but if he once suspected me, I could not have aided you. As Heaven hears me, this is the truth!"

"I know—I believe you, dear Dandy," said Ruth, vainly striving to choke back her sobs. "Don't try to say any more. It will only make you worse."

"There can be no worse—it will all be better for me, now," he said with a faint smile. "Those fellows, struck hard, and they struck home. I don't know as I am very sorry. The last few hours have made a great change for and in me. I never knew what I was until you opened my eyes. Nay—I don't mean it for a reproach. I was a blind fool before that. This is better than I have deserved—the death of a man, and in your arms!"

Ruth could make no reply. There was a painful swelling in her throat that choked her.

Dandy began to wander in his thoughts, and

even through her tears Ruth could see that death was rapidly drawing near. She was helpless. She could do nothing, only sit there and support his head.

Then Dandy began to revive, as it seemed; but it was only the last expiring flicker.

"You haven't said you—forgive me—those words," he gasped, feebly, a wistful look in his great eyes.

"God knows I do, Dandy, from the bottom of my heart. But it is I who have wronged you the most deeply—it is I who must ask forgiveness."

"No—you were right. I would not see. You had to open my eyes. But—after I am dead—"

"What, Dandy?" Ruth murmured as he paused.

"No one will see—or know—if you kiss me. You can shut your eyes—" he faltered, yet wistfully.

With a low sob, Ruth bowed her head and pressed her lips to his, not once, but often. And even as she did so, Dandy was called home.

Gently Ruth lowered his head and arose to her feet, alone in the midst of death.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHAT HONOR READ.

AFRAID to remonstrate or disobey, yet dreading the worst, Honor Craythorne slowly retraced her steps to the hollow tree, with many a backward glance over her shoulder. The fierce expression upon her father's face, together with the strange fire that filled his eyes, gave her a fresh insight into his real nature, and remembering what bitter cause he had for hating these two men, she dreaded lest he should allow his passions to overcome his prudence, and commit a deed that would be his ruin.

Watching, she saw the madman passing rapidly down the bank of the bayou, and with a daring resolve that caused her heart to leap into her throat, Honor emerged from the tree and ran swiftly down to the lagoon. It was her intention to release the two men, believing that, unarmed as they were, bodily fear would induce them to flee at once, without attempting to molest her. This was not through any motives of pity for those she sought to rescue from captivity, but from a laudable desire to save her father from committing a deadly crime.

In this hope she was foiled, as the reader is already aware, owing to the precautions taken by the giant madman before leaving them, and when Honor caught a glimpse of Stephen Craythorne paddling up the bayou in his canoe, she hastily retreated once more to the hollow tree.

Faint and sick at heart, she ascended to the rude scaffolding, and sunk down upon the blankets that composed her couch. As she did so, her elbow struck and scattered the papers and other articles which Craythorne had taken from the pockets of his prisoners and placed in her care. A love of order was one of Honor's strongest traits, nor did it fail her even in this moment of strong agitation. Almost mechanically she began to sort over the papers, but as she smoothed out one that had been somewhat crumpled, a low cry parted her lips. Her own name, and then the name of her father, written in a clear, bold hand, caught her eye. Thus her curiosity was aroused, and she read the few lines with breathless interest, for it was the agreement of Lee Ovelman with Josh Howe, concerning the murder of Stephen Craythorne or Roger Mayberry, and the abduction of Honor, his daughter.

Puzzled by the name which she was ignorant that her father ever bore, Honor tremblingly unfolded the paper on the back of which these words had been written, and there read something that caused her brain to whirl and her heart to almost cease its functions. The paper was a printed hand-bill, offering ten thousand dollars reward for the arrest of one Roger Mayberry, who had been found guilty at the coroner's inquest, of murdering his brother, Royal Mayberry!

So much was explained by these words! These strange fits of gloomy despondency were the gnawing of remorse—of a guilty conscience—but Honor fiercely fought back the haunting memories. He was her father—he was not guilty—though the whole world cry against him, she would believe him innocent of that horrible crime!

With feverish haste she sought for further information among the remaining papers: sought and found it, but it was long before she could see her way fairly through the mists, and fully comprehend the whole sad story.

What Honor slowly and painfully puzzled out, can be more briefly placed before the reader, if reduced to one connected narrative.

Roger and Royal Mayberry were brothers, living in Philadelphia, under one roof, and being partners in a lucrative business. Roger was the eldest, by half a score years, and had watched over, cared for and acted as a guardian to Royal since the childhood of the latter, when they were left alone in the world to fight the battle of life. Roger was a cool, steady, clear-headed man of business. Royal was as handsome as an archangel, a man of fashion, and greatly given to gallantry. One was a

working bee, the other a butterfly, crossed with the wasp.

Roger married for love, and Honor was the fruit of that union. His wife died when Honor was two years old, and after the conventional term of mourning had expired, the widower married again, this time to provide his little girl with a mother. That proved to be the greatest mistake of his life. The stepmother was beautiful, but wholly unprincipled. She had married the rich merchant, not for love, but for his money, still, when she saw that her husband's whole heart was fixed upon his child, who was dearer far to him than she could ever hope to be, she grew madly jealous of little Honor, and caused the child many an hour of unhappiness and pain, thus coloring her whole life.

Having the work of two to do, for Royal was little more than an ornamental member of the firm, Roger was slow to perceive this, nor were his eyes opened to the whole black truth until too late. Even then an old friend of the family was the means of convincing him of his dishonor.

For some time Roger fought against the horrible suspicion, and strove to choke down his doubts, but the hour soon came when he could no longer doubt that he had been most bitterly betrayed by his wife and his brother.

Which was most to blame, is a question that need not be entered upon here. Enough that, as usual, the injured husband was the last to perceive his dishonor, and that when his eyes were fairly opened, he found the scandal was the common talk of the circle in which he and his moved.

Though outwardly so cold and reserved, Roger was intensely proud and endowed with strong passions. Yet, despite this, he waited and watched until he gained indisputable proof of the truth.

Late that same night he visited Royal in his own room, and taxed him with the crime. At first it was denied, but Roger named proof after proof, ending with the damning evidence of his own eyes.

Then Royal attempted to carry it off with a high hand, and presently the brothers came to blows. They grappled and fell, Roger uppermost. When he arose, Royal was lying there, open-eyed and white-faced, dark blood dying his breast, while Roger held a crimsoned knife in his hand. How he came by this, he did not know, for it belonged to Royal. Nor did he remember striking the fatal blow. But the deed was done. His brother lay at his feet, seemingly dead, and by his hand.

Had he been alone in the world, Roger would have remained to abide the consequences, but he could not think of leaving his loved daughter to the guardianship of his faithless wife, and taking his child, he fled upon the first train he could catch.

The noise of the struggle and fall was heard by the guilty wife, and as soon as Roger left the house, she entered the room. A scream of terror and anguish broke from her lips as she beheld the body of her paramour weltering in his blood, and as the alarmed servants flocked to the spot, she sent one of them in quest of the family physician, and others to notify the police of the murder, declaring that Roger was the assassin, and that she had been an eye-witness of the deed.

The physician came first, and promptly cleared the room of all save himself and the wounded man, who was just recovering his consciousness.

Half an hour later, when the police came, the door was opened at their command, and the physician silently stood aside to allow them to view the body—and Royal Mayberry drew his last breath as they reached his side!

The criminal was instantly sought for, but he managed to elude their quest, by rapid motion and many changes and doublings.

An inquest was held, and the guilty wife deliberately perjured herself, by swearing that she saw the fatal blow dealt, but was unable to prevent it. This evidence was fully confirmed by her maid. The wound and weapon were examined by professional experts, who affirmed that the knife had been driven fairly through the dead man's heart with one strong stroke.

The verdict was given in accordance with the testimony, and Roger Mayberry was pronounced guilty of willful murder.

But he was never brought to trial, though the guilty wife offered a reward of ten thousand dollars for his arrest, though taking care that her name should not openly appear in the transaction.

Years passed by. The guilty wife died. The tragedy was forgotten by all save those more intimately concerned, and a stray detective or two who, like Galusha Evergreen, still dreamt of winning the golden prize, when the subject was revived in a truly startling manner, only a few months prior to the date of this story.

The family physician of the Mayberrys died, and on his death-bed he made a full confession that fully exonerated Roger Mayberry of the crime recorded against him.

Here, again, Royal Mayberry had been guilty of seduction, and when he was left alone with

the wounded *roue*, the doctor charged him with his daughter's ruin. Learning that his victim had confessed all, Royal did not deny the charge, but laughed to scorn the father's proposal that he should make all possible amends by marriage.

Half crazed, the doctor chloroformed the wounded man, and then inserting the blood-stained knife carefully into the wound, pressed it home to the hilt, thus avenging his wrongs.

In addition, he swore that the injury inflicted by Roger Mayberry was merely a superficial wound, not fatal, nor even serious, though the flow of blood was great; that the insensibility of Royal, was caused by his heavy fall alone.

This confession was signed and witnessed in due form, and a copy of which was now in Honor's hands, among other papers pertaining to the case.

A distant and honest relative had succeeded to the large estate, which had almost doubled under his care, and when he learned the truth, he set his lawyers to work to discover the missing man and child, if possible. They succeeded, just how would be too long a story to relate here, and sent their junior, Zenas Dawson, to make sure there was no mistake. He bore a copy of the confession, and to prove that it was not a snare, a pardon signed by the governor, together with whatever papers he believed might be of avail.

This honest relative possessed a dishonest nephew, in the person of Lee Ovelman, who, as his uncle had no children, expected to be his heir. Through a long-tongued clerk of the firm of which Dawson was a member, Ovelman learned what was in the wind, though he was late in making the discovery that Stephen Craythorne was the missing Roger Mayberry, and using his influence as a member of the league, he set the subtle plot in motion that has been gradually unveiled in these pages.

Failing in this, and knowing that Honor must eventually inherit the estate, he resolved to terrify the timid girl into marrying him, as a last hope of securing the wealth he had for years considered as good as his own.

Honor did not learn all that has been stated here at that time, nor ever, in fact, but she saw that the black cloud which had so long hovered over them, was dispelled at last, and knew that the corroding, heart-chilling fears which she had so often entertained were without foundation.

It was mid-afternoon when Roger Mayberry returned to the hollow tree, where Honor received him with a flood of joyous tears and many a kiss, but it was not until she put the confession of the real murderer into his hand, that he could at all understand her joyful excitement.

As he read, the mists of madness rolled away from his bewildered brain, and he swayed to and fro like a drunken man as the glad truth began to dawn upon him. A low moan broke from his lips, and the paper dropped from his trembling hand. His limbs refused longer to support his weight, and he sunk heavily to the ground like one struck by lightning!

CHAPTER XXXII.

OUT OF THE SWAMP.

GREAT joy seldom kills, and, although it was many days before Roger Mayberry, Stephen Craythorne no longer, fully recovered from the effects of that sudden awakening, only a few minutes elapsed before the giant arose to his feet, once more in his right senses.

For long and weary years he brooded over the death of the brother he had loved so well, and whom he believed himself to have slain in a moment of ungovernable passion, until his brain was terribly shattered. Only for Honor's sake, he would long since have surrendered himself to satisfy the claims of justice. At times the temptation to avow himself a murderer, became so nearly irresistible that in the desperate struggle to keep the fatal words fast locked within his breast, he would feel his reason begin to totter, and for Honor's sake, he would flee to the swamps where he might shout aloud the condemning words to the speechless denizens of the dreary waste, thus easing his overtasked brain, without fear of his confession ever being repeated to bring the blush of shame and degradation to the cheek of his innocent child.

Now that he learned the whole truth, his old-time energy and directness of action returned to him. His first wish was to have the strange story confirmed, and remembering what Alabama Joe had testified about leaving Zenas Dawson in Crazy John's deserted cabin, he resolved to hasten thither at once. Honor was only too glad to abandon the gloomy swamp where she had suffered so much in mind, and eagerly seconded his efforts. Their small effects were placed in the canoe, and both entering, the giant sent the dug out rapidly down to the river.

Here Craythorne, or Mayberry, as he must be termed henceforth, paused, and cast a keen glance down-stream. Honor turned a shade paler as she instinctively divined what he was looking for, but she remained silent, fearing that an incautious word might bring back clouds where all should remain bright sunshine.

Failing to discover the object he was looking for, Roger Mayberry turned the prow of his canoe up-stream, and plied the paddle with redoubled energy, like one all afire to learn the whole truth.

Swift though his progress was, he entered the bayou which led up to the ruins of the old cabin, two late to meet the person he sought. Several hours before Doctor Brady, aided by Tom Clark, had completed a rude litter which was attached by shafts to the sides of the horse, the other ends of the poles dragging upon the ground. In this primitive conveyance, Zenas Dawson was placed, and by now, was almost at Rushville, which, by the way, he reached in perfect safety.

But if the giant did not meet the man he most wished to see as he landed from the canoe and paused beside the still smoking ruins, he did meet the two men who were beyond a doubt the most anxious to see him; Galusha Evergreen, the detective, and Cherokee Dan, the half-breed man-hunter, accompanied by his four hounds, who just then emerged from the undergrowth, not twenty paces distant from their coveted prey.

This meeting was so totally unexpected that all their carefully arranged plans were set at naught, and in his eagerness to win the long-coveted reward, Galusha Evergreen blurted out:

"You're my prisoner, Roger Mayberry—" "For what?" sternly demanded the giant, throwing his rifle muzzle forward. "Stand off, until I know for what alleged crime you are trying to arrest me, or I'll send a bullet through your head!"

"We're two to one, not counting the dogs," quietly retorted the man-hunter. "Let me but lift my finger, and both you and the girl would be throttled before you could pull trigger."

"Is it as Roger Mayberry, or Stephen Craythorne that you want to arrest me?" added the giant, ignoring Cherokee Dan's significant speech.

"As the first—for murdering your brother, Royal Mayberry, on September—"

A short, cutting laugh cut short this hasty speech, as Roger Mayberry took the copy of the doctor's confession from his bosom and tossed it toward the detective.

"Read that paper—but don't attempt to destroy it, if you value your life. 'You will see that the real assassin has been discovered, by the grace of Heaven!'"

Galusha Evergreen was the picture of dolorous consternation as he rapidly devoured the contents of the paper, and a furious curse broke from his lips as he realized how vain were his ardent hopes of fingering that munificent reward.

"Is it as he says?" hissed the angry half-blood, but reading the truth in the face of the detective even before he spoke.

"Give me back that paper, and mark well my words," sternly uttered the giant. "If I catch you following my footsteps again, I will shoot you as I would a rattlesnake."

The crestfallen detective could not utter a word, as Mayberry took the paper and bade Honor follow him.

The giant did not return to the canoe, as, being thoroughly acquainted with the surrounding swamp, he knew that he could reach the village much sooner by land than by following the river and creek. Honor followed him without demur, and found her reward in doing so. At every bad bit of the trail, Mayberry would take her in his strong arms and carry her until open ground was again reached. And in that swamp journey, father and daughter grew much nearer together, than had ever been the case. The sunlight was already entering their hearts, never to leave them again while life endured.

An hour carried them through the swamp to the road, which he had scarcely entered when the splashing of horses' hoofs in the mire to the right attracted their attention, and with a gasping cry of ineffable delight, Ruth Livingstone met them. She was riding one horse, leading another, upon the saddle of which was strapped the body of poor Dandy, the Dwarf, while three other horses followed docilely in her wake.

We pass over the strange story as hastily related to her friends, only pausing to explain how she came there, after that fashion.

For some time after Dandy drew his last breath in her arms, Ruth was like one dazed. Alone with the dead, in the midst of a difficult and dangerous swamp, whither she had been conveyed with her eyes blindfolded. How could she ever extricate herself, and reach home and friends?

Not until one of the horses whinnied did she see any hope of solving the problem. A good horse woman, an ardent lover of them, and with a firm confidence in the sagacity of the animals, she resolved to mount one and trust its instincts to take her back to the road the same way they came. But she hesitated, even while in the act of mounting the horse she hastily saddled and bridled. She could not bear to think of Dandy lying there, to become a prey to the wild beasts, even though he was dead. He had yielded up

his life in her defense; his body should have a Christian burial at all hazards.

Though no very heavy weight, it was a difficult task to raise the body into the saddle and strap it firmly there; but Ruth persisted until she finally succeeded.

Then she searched for the point where the little island had been approached, and mounting, suffered her horse to choose its own way, never once touching rein until the high road was reached, thus justifying her faith in the instincts of the noble animal.

Scarcely had she concluded her story, and prevailed upon Honor and her father to mount two of the free horses, when another joyful surprise took place. A footman suddenly rounded the bend in the road before them, and paused a moment at the sight, as though unable to trust the evidence of his eyes. But only for a moment.

Then, with a choking cry of ineffable joy, Alabama Joe darted forward, and lifting Ruth from the saddle, hugged her to his bosom as he rained kisses all over her face. And Ruth nestled there unresistingly, just as though she liked it!

Here, too, the explanation is a simple one. The lover found where Ruth had been placed upon the ground near the grove of trees, just outside of town, while the horses were being led forth, and carefully taking the measurement of each hoof, Alabama Joe led a dozen men along the trail, slowly but surely, until the lost was found.

Then, the first transports over, the reunited party set forward, and were soon out of the swamp.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

JUSTICE UNTO ALL.

THAT same night Zenas Dawson willingly granted Roger Mayberry a brief interview, in which he fully confirmed the grateful news gleaned from the papers so strangely delivered. He would have done so had his wounds and burns been twice as severe and painful, for was not this big man the father of the fair, sweet-faced maiden, and had he not fully made up his mind to ask a favor of Mayberry one of these days, when his strength and a little of his good looks came back to him? But the old man was content to wait, now that he knew it was not all a dream, or fancy of an unsettled brain.

Poor Dandy and Jim Carby were buried side by side in the little grave-yard, and kindly tears moistened both graves, for Ruth told Honor how she had soothed the death-bed of the sheriff, and all she had spoken and acted in her name. Poor fellows! the love for which they famished while living was not wholly denied them in death.

But gloomy thoughts could not last long in the presence of so much joy. Honor in the knowledge that her father was not the criminal she had feared, rather than believed; he in knowing that the death of his guilty brother did not rest upon his head; Ruth, in her release from a terrible peril, and in the full consciousness of being beloved by the object of her love; Alabama Joe the same, only with the pronouns reversed; Dawson, that his delicate mission was at length accomplished, and with bright hopes dawning before him; the public in general, because the tap of the Washington Arms was thrown open to all without charge; all hearts filled with unalloyed joy, save in the case of the dignified landlord. He was sincerely happy in the restoration of his daughter, but was rendered no less miserable by the fear that he had found a son-in-law in the person of the unknown, illiterate, uncouth Alabama Joe, who was even then amusing the company by singing the negro song that had given him his *sobriquet*. True, he had so far proven himself one of nature's noblemen, but it was a sad descent for the Livingstones. Yet he knew that it could not be helped. Ruth had told him everything, and answered his objections by declaring that she would marry Alabama Joe, if she had to make another midnight flitting of it, a threat that he knew the girl was quite capable of putting into execution.

There was one other exception to the rule of happiness. Galusha Evergreen crawled into town, a mass of blood and bruises. Cherokee Dan had taken double pay for his disappointment, by soundly thumping the detective, and then robbing him.

Between Ruth and Alabama Joe, Randolph Livingstone had no peace until he gave his consent to their marriage, and one week from the day on which Dandy the Dwarf was placed in the grave, the maiden he loved so madly was made a wife.

That was a wedding long to be remembered, for more reasons than one. In the first place, Alabama Joe made his appearance fresh from the hands of the village barber, and in full dress. Though his face and hands were still marked by the searing flames out of which he had drawn the wounded lawyer, he looked and acted every inch the gentleman, as even Randolph Livingstone was forced to confess.

When the ceremony was completed and the warm congratulations over, the bridegroom begged the indulgence of the company, while he

made a short explanation, which may thus be condensed.

He had been one of those present at the sale of the Livingstone plantation, and there had first seen his present bride. He felt a strong interest in her, and never rested until he discovered their new location. Acting upon a whim, he resolved to woo her in a humble guise, and did so as Alabama Joe, a homeless, penniless adventurer. That she loved him for himself, she had given the best of proof, and now he begged her to accept this paper, and to forgive him for the harmless deception he had practiced upon her and her father.

The paper alluded to was found to be the title-deeds of the Livingstone plantation and all its belongings, made out in the name of Mrs. Joseph Freeman Adair. It need hardly be said that pardon was granted the venial offender. And when "Alabama Joe," later in the evening, begged his father-in-law's pardon for his many breaches of etiquette, and, on questioning, admitted that his family was quite as old as the Livingstones, there was not a lighter heart in all the company than that which throbbed in the bosom of the aristocratic landlord of the Washington Arms.

Landlord for that night only, for he was persuaded to sell the tavern, and return to his old home with his happy children.

Dawson's courtship was somewhat longer, but met with a no less happy termination. Roger Mayberry was cleared of crime in the eyes of the world, and lived to see Honor married to the young lawyer. But the severe trials he had undergone, had worn out his iron constitution, and he died soon after the wedding. Honor was made the heir to Lee Ovelman's uncle's wealth, and both she and her husband are still living to enjoy it.

Long before this date—while they were still stopping at the Livingstone place, in fact—a strange, wild story was talked about. The story of two men being found drowned near the mouth of Black River. A settler had his curiosity aroused by the odd appearance of a drifting log, and put off to it in his canoe. The bodies of two men were found firmly bound to the log, floating head downward, their fettered feet sticking up in the air. Nothing could be told save that they were white, for the fishes had been at work.

Two persons among the listeners to this weird story might have solved the mystery, but neither of them ever alluded to the subject, even to each other.

THE END.

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